

# THE THIRD ALTERNATIVE



an interview with  
**Michael Moorcock**

extraordinary new stories

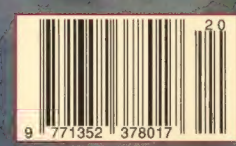
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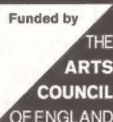
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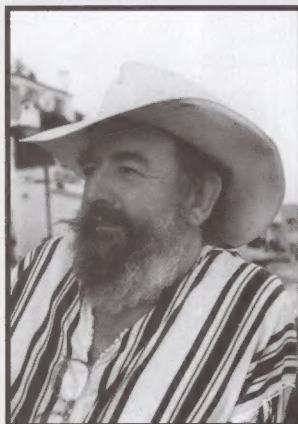
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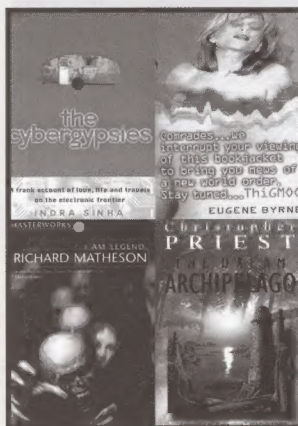
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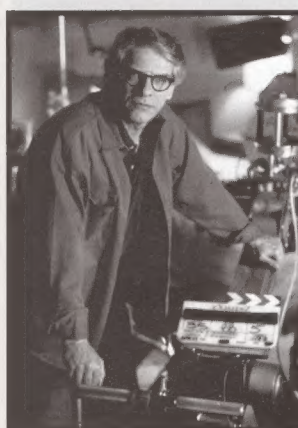
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# EDITORIAL

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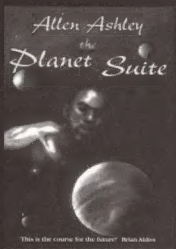
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Postage and packing is absolutely FREE. All offers run until the publication of the next issue of TTA, when they may be renewed, dropped or altered.

*Last Rites & Resurrections* has sold out.



There was I, last issue, soliciting opinions on the proposed TTA reviews section, saying that we might well have to increase the page count by four to accommodate it. Well, even though the reviews section is as yet only a four-page sampler, here we are with an extra *eight* pages anyway... The cover price remains the same, though I'll be honest and say that at the time of writing I don't really know if it will stay this way or increase. The cost of postage would've gone up by six pence as it was, and with the extra pages I imagine that TTA will now cost an extra sixteen pence to post. Not that I'm complaining. I've always said that the Royal Mail doesn't make nearly enough profit. Some people told me that they'd willingly pay more for the inclusion of an extra reviews section, they really did. We'll see how it goes.

Back to The Review. Many thanks to everyone who expressed an opinion on this – there were quite a few more than we could fit into the letters pages. Everybody was in favour, and pretty much in agreement too. As I hinted at above, this time the segment could be seen as a kind of sampler, in as much as we only cover books (special thanks to Peter Tennant). We already have reviews in for some books that arrived *just* too late for this issue, and in future, as well as covering a much wider range of books, I hope that we'll also include film, video, any and all other media, plus regular mini-interviews. The scope and potential really is enormous, and there is plenty of room for initiative, so do please just get in touch if you want to contribute or suggest anything.

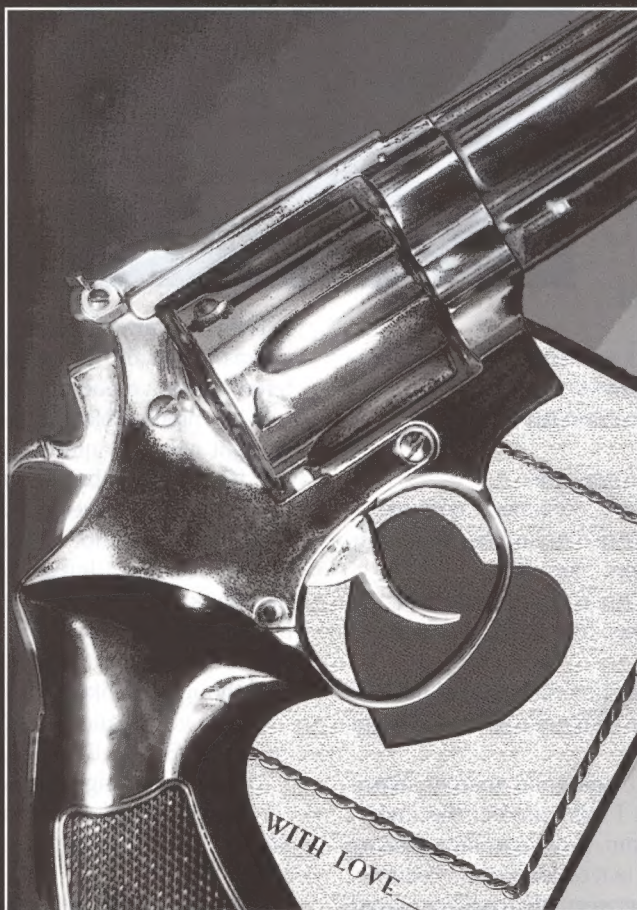
As I said, Peter Tennant especially put in a lot of work this issue, and he did this in a remarkably short space of time. Others who perhaps don't always get the credit they deserve, putting in the hours and showing commendable patience with a tyrannical editor, are our regular team of artists: Wendy Down, Roddy Williams and David Checkley. They consistently produce high-class images at a rate which is incredible considering they've doubtless got many other things to do (hard to imagine that they're anywhere near as important, of course); and lest you think my praise somewhat gushing I should remind you that at the same time they've also been working flat out on the massive second issue of *Crimewave*, which at 128 pages is over twice the size of issue one.

We've got some amazing stuff coming up in TTA. See you again in September.



# CRIMEWAVE

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Jeff was waiting for us on a splay of flat rocks. He must have heard the boat's little motor long before we came into sight.

"Look," I said to Jenny, "it's Daddy."

She waved and so did he. He was still a hundred yards away, but even at that distance I could tell he was smiling.

Sallem cut the motor. The boat drifted the last few yards across the current, bumping against the rocks and nestling in behind another already tied up there.

"Hello, hello," cried Jeff as he stretched for the bow rope. He held the boat steady while we climbed out. Jenny went to him and hugged his hips. He put a hand on her head.

"Hello, honey. Did you have a good trip?"

"We saw monkeys," said Jenny and he laughed.

I stepped out. I went to Jeff and kissed him, Jenny momentarily squeezed between us until she wriggled free.

"Good to see you," I said and he nodded.

"You too."

"Was the trip okay?" he asked in my ear.

"Fine. Sallem met us off the plane. He's been fantastic."

As we parted he kept my hand in his and brushed hair from my face. "It's great to see you," he said.

Sallem had secured the rope. He started to unload the cardboard boxes of supplies. Jenny had already wandered off across the rocks.

"Careful, honey," Jeff called after her, then turned back to me. "Why don't you take her to the camp. It's just up through that gap. I'll help Sallem."

The bank was steep, clothed in bushes and sharply angled trees. Jenny clambered up and as I followed her the undergrowth opened out to reveal the camp. Two large, new-looking wooden cabins, roofed with great leaves, stood in a clearing. Each was fronted with a veranda. Between them tables covered in cooking equipment stood beneath a tarpaulin.

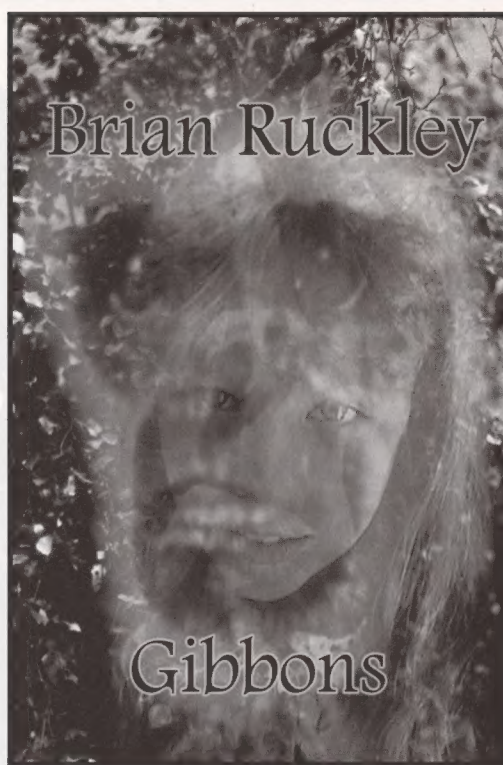
"Well what do you think, Jenny?" I asked.

She was grinning.

Jenny was born within a year of Jeff completing the fieldwork for his PhD. Before that he had spent months at a time overseas, and we had waited until that need would be reduced. As she grew, Jeff was rarely abroad — the occasional field trip or conference. Then he was offered the chance to manage a new rainforest research centre, and we agreed he should take it on. It meant longer absences, but Jenny was older now. After two years, it was Jeff who suggested he should return to research that did not require so much travel. The long periods away from home, and from Jenny and me, had been harder on him than he had expected. The idea that we should visit him during his last field season was mine. I wanted to see the forest that had consumed so much of his time and his thoughts, and we both felt Jenny should see a world that might be all but lost in her lifetime. So, late one summer, she and I flew to join him on the far side of the world.

We sat beneath the tarpaulin eating noodles in the late afternoon warmth.

## Brian Ruckley



## Gibbons

"We've got four researchers coming up." Jeff said. "Sallem'll go off tomorrow — meet them at the airfield like he did you — so we'll have a few days to get you settled in."

Jenny looked up from struggling to keep noodles on her fork. "Can we see the forest?" she asked.

"Of course, love."

"I want to see some more monkeys. Can we go after supper?"

"Let's wait till tomorrow. It'll rain soon. Anyway, you'll need an early night so we can get up at dawn. We'll be able to hear the gibbons then."

"Are gibbons monkeys?" Jenny asked.

"Not exactly. They're apes, which is nearly the same thing."

That seemed to satisfy Jenny. "How do you know it's going to rain?" she demanded after a minute's quiet.

"Wait and see."

The rain started not long before dusk, falling from massive clouds that had rolled in seemingly from nowhere. We sheltered on the veranda of our hut.

"Very predictable climate round here," said Jeff.

Night came on quickly. Jeff lit an oil lantern. Jenny was still wide awake, but I could feel our long journey catching up with me. My eyes grew sluggish.

"Will we see a lot of gibbons tomorrow?" asked Jenny.

"Maybe some," Jeff said. "Hang on and I'll show you what they look like." He retrieved a field guide from inside the hut and sat Jenny on his knee as he leafed through it. "There you are."

"I thought monkeys had tails," Jenny said.

"I told you, honey, they're not monkeys."

"Is that Battutut?" Jenny asked, pointing at the page.

"That's an orang-utan. What's a battutut?"

I stirred myself. "Sallem was telling us stories the other night," I said. "Battutut's some monster or other that lives in the forest."

"He's not a monster," said Jenny, with a slight reprimand in her voice. "He's a little hairy man. Only children can see him and sometimes he comes to villages and takes them away to play in the forest."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," muttered Jeff. "You mustn't worry about things like that, Jenny. Sallem's people just make up stories. Like fairy stories."

"I wasn't worried," said Jenny blandly.

Jenny was excited by the paraphernalia of hammock and mosquito net, but settled down soon enough, separated from us by a partition of heavy cloth. Jeff and I struggled into a great double hammock.

"Have you ever had sex in a hammock?" he whispered.

I smiled to myself. "Certainly not," I murmured. "Anyway, Jenny might still be awake."

"Shame it's stopped raining. That'd give us some camouflage," he said, and I almost laughed.

We held one another in the darkness, and after a while made love like that, locked together, as quietly as we could. Though the hammock swayed comically and I had to suppress the urge to giggle, it was a sweet reunion. Jeff fell asleep, but despite my weariness I could not. The hammock was uncomfortable and I was afraid to move in case I woke



him. It started to rain halfheartedly after an hour or so: an intermittent soft drumming on the roof. Insects were trilling to one another outside. Half-formed thoughts — pleasure, trepidation, incongruous memories of home — drifted in my head. Eventually, I dozed.

The rocking of the hammock as Jeff clambered out woke me. He called softly to rouse Jenny. She and I were clumsy as we dressed, befuddled and unaccustomed to such an early rise. Jeff seemed to have shed sleep instantly. There was only a hint of light in the cool air. He led us out of the hut and along a trail into the forest. Gradually the trees lifted themselves out of night, returning from whatever secret place they had been, and the grey tones of dawn gave way to muted colour. Rising up all around was the sound of insects, as if the tree trunks themselves were calling out to greet the day. The going was easy and after fifteen minutes we emerged into a little clearing on the slope above the camp. The roofs of the huts were visible below, and the river valley was spread out before us; nothing but trees reaching to every horizon. The rise and fall of the land was transformed into great leafy waves on a green sea. There was a crude wooden bench and we sat together upon it. Jenny huddled between Jeff and me. He told us we must keep quiet, so the three of us waited in silence for the gibbons. And as the first real stirrings of the Sun's warmth could be felt, it began. Jenny and I heard the voice of the forest for the first time.

The song came as if from another world: a male and female serenading one another as the forest roused itself. Had I not known otherwise, I would have thought these the voices of some huge, gaudily plumaged birds. They whooped musically, a sound by turns cooing then bounding, urgent then lapsing. Then the female's great call started — a fluid series of notes, each rising within itself. They accelerated and quickly poured together into a high ululation that spilled out across the treetops and swelled for long moments before abruptly sinking away. Over and over the ritual repeated itself, and it drew answers from the distance. One after another, more pairs gave voice until it seemed that as far as the ear could reach, gibbons were singing in the roof of the forest.

"They live in pairs," Jeff explained as the songs rolled around the valley, a haunting chorus. "Most mornings, they sing to each other. It's a bonding thing, but territorial as well."

I was only half listening. The eerie songs were unlike anything I had ever heard before. Jenny too seemed entranced. We sat without speaking for a while.

"I can't see them," Jenny said as, pair by pair, the gibbons gradually fell silent.

"Not from here," said Jeff. "We'll go back through the closest territory — see if we can't pick them up on the way. But don't worry. If we don't see them today we will tomorrow, or the next day."

We returned by a longer route, and as we went he told us the name of this tree, that creeper, that bird. He was happy, demonstrating his possession of the forest's secrets. I could see that Jenny wasn't taking it in. I was content to see him relaxed and confident, and felt a glow of pride in him and for him, but I cannot now remember any of the names he told us. We did not find any gibbons, but by then Jenny hardly seemed to care. She was bound up in the place itself.

As we drew close to the camp, there was a distant boom like a muffled cannon shot. "What was that?" I asked.

"Tree falling," he said. "It happens every so often."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

He smiled. "Not really. Bound to happen now and again when you've got this many trees. It's one of the things we're

studying, actually. The colonisation process of the gaps. It's the forest's way of renewing itself."

When we emerged into the camp clearing, Sallem was waiting. He and Jeff spoke briefly and shook hands. Sallem turned to Jenny and me and smiled broadly, holding up his hand in farewell. He headed down to the river. A few minutes later, the sound of the engine had faded away to nothing. Jeff said, "Well it's just us for a while now. We've got the place all to ourselves."

Jenny and I discovered things together, under Jeff's supervision. He took us to the rapids just upstream of the camp so that we could feel the spray. He showed us the hidden place where pheasants displayed, the great cracked tree bats roosted in, the endless mud-roofed walkways the termites had made up into the treetops. He showed us — with the greatest satisfaction of all perhaps — how he made bread in a crude metal box on top of the little stove. I could see more clearly than ever the strength of his fascination for this place: the intensity with which he longed to understand its details.

Jenny was sitting on the edge of the rocks, her feet dangling in the water. I moved to sit beside her and she let out an irritated moan. "What's the matter?" I asked.

"You scared the fishes away," she said. "I was playing with them."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I expect they'll come back."

"Maybe if you go away again," she said without malice.

"Well, I'm going in for a swim," I said.

I went to find a point to enter the river.

"They're coming back," she called out almost at once.

"Be careful," I said. "They might bite."

"They just nibble."

I found a great flat rock sloping down into the water and stripped to my swimming costume. A bay was carved into the riverbank there — a pool of deep water undisturbed by currents. I stroked out and rolled lazily onto my back. It felt serene: the rapids rumbling just out of sight upstream; the terraces and parapets of leaf rising up from the banks; the sky a perfect sheet of blue. I let my head fall back until it was almost submerged and closed my eyes. Water filled my ears. For a few moments I drifted.

Something caught at the edge of my hearing and I lifted my head. Jenny still sat there, but now she was watching the trees on the far side of the river. I looked and saw nothing. Then I heard it again. A gibbon was calling, so close that the sound seemed to fill the valley. The calls were disjointed, bouncing around. I began to swim back toward Jenny. The gibbon fell abruptly silent and the quiet that came then was so sudden that I paused, treading water. There was a shaking in the highest branches opposite Jenny. A shivering of leaves passed down through the canopy to the very edge of the forest. And then suddenly it was there, hanging by one arm from a thinly leafed bough. Jenny and the gibbon regarded one another across the water. I did not breathe. Then it was gone, spinning about and crashing off through the trees — back into the wide green.

"Did you see? Did you see?" Jenny demanded as I slipped out of the water.

"Yes, love. It was a gibbon, wasn't it?"

She gazed after the animal. Her eyes had an unfocused sheen, as if she was looking at something far beyond the forest's curtain.

We rose early to enjoy the cool mornings. After noon, the heat would become too intense to move around the exposed



camp, and the forest itself seemed to sink into a kind of torpor. Sometimes Jeff went off alone to work: collecting botanical samples, keeping trails clear, checking the cage traps he had set for rats. Jenny and I would lounge in the river or find shade on the veranda. At dusk, it rained. We went to bed not long after nightfall, avoiding the mosquitoes and other, larger, insects that swarmed in towards our lights. Patterns softly established themselves in our lives under the metronomic influence of the place's own cycles.

I surfaced from sleep knowing that something had woken me, but not sure what. It was black inside the hut, but there was moonlight outside and I saw Jenny as a dark shape against it. She was standing quite still in the open doorway.

"Jenny," I said softly, trying not to disturb Jeff. We slept in separate hammocks now — it was the only way I could get a full night's sleep — but he was only an arm's reach away.

I slipped out of the hammock and went to her. She did not react as I came up behind her and spoke her name again, though I could see over her shoulder that her eyes were open. I followed her gaze and felt an instinctive lurch of alarm in my throat. Sitting a few yards away at the end of the veranda, regarding Jenny with its head tilted slightly to one side, was an animal I had never seen before. It was like a cat or a dog, but not quite either, and I could make out bold black stripes on grey fur. It seemed utterly unafraid and did not respond to my presence for long moments. Then it slowly stood up, turned and padded off across the bare ground to disappear into the moon shadows. Jenny exhaled and blinked. She looked round as if noticing me for the first time. "Hello," she said.

"A civet," Jeff said in the morning. "They come into the camp sometimes at night looking for scraps. Strange that it should just sit there. They're normally pretty jumpy. The locals give them a hard time because they kill chickens."

He was frowning.

"They were just looking at each other," I said.

"Strange," he repeated.

You were never quite alone. A moment's rest upon a rotting log brought leeches arching across the forest floor. The carpet of fallen leaves that seemed so still was suddenly scattered with little looping shapes. A half-glimpsed movement amongst the tree trunks might be caught in time to recognise it as a lizard gliding on membranous sheets of skin. Above all there was the forest itself. Sometimes, standing still and quiet for long enough and looking at no one thing, I could almost begin to feel the weight of the trees upon the land; the crowding in of the places that lay uncounted miles away beneath that same canopy; the great, deep movements of the vast organism.

The next night, I woke once more into darkness. This time, though, it was some unnerving dream that had woken me, and I came awake with a start. The throbbing chorus of insects was the only sound. My hammock was swaying gently. I could not catch the fragments of the dream as they scattered before my wakefulness, but I was left with the thread of fear it had spun in my mind. I eased myself free of the hammock and took a torch down from where it hung just inside the door. Our only toilets were crude sheds erected over pits a short way from the hut, and on a cloudy night it was all but impossible to find them without a torch.

I slipped on a pair of sandals and walked carefully over earth still damp from the evening's showers. I could not be certain what time it was, but dusk must have been long past, for the air had lost all trace of the day's oppressive heat. The torch's beam picked out the lopsided form of the

latrine and brushed upon the wall of forest that loomed twenty paces beyond it. There was some echo of my dream in the ill-defined sight of the dark and tangled growth at the forest's edge, and it made me hesitate in my stride. As I paused, calling myself a fool beneath my breath, two points of pale green light appeared amongst the vegetation. For an instant I was uncomprehending. Then, even as the realisation came that these were eyes, another pair appeared, and another. I swung the torch slowly around and it found, one after another, a dozen or more pairs of eyes glowing in the gloomy fringe of the forest. Some were higher than I was tall, others close to the ground. There was not a sound from this feral audience, and the torch was not strong enough to pick any hint of their form out from the darkness. I stood for a few seconds, unable to move my legs, while the denizens of the forest silently regarded me.

I exhaled deeply, surprised to find that I had stopped breathing, and took a careful step backwards. I dared not turn my back until I had almost reached the hut and those piercing eyes had been gathered back by the night. I slid into my hammock, and wrapped my arms about me. Sleep would not come, and again and again I found myself lifting my head and looking toward the doorway of the hut, fearing what I might find there. When I saw the first grey hint of dawn, a childish tingle of relief ran through me.

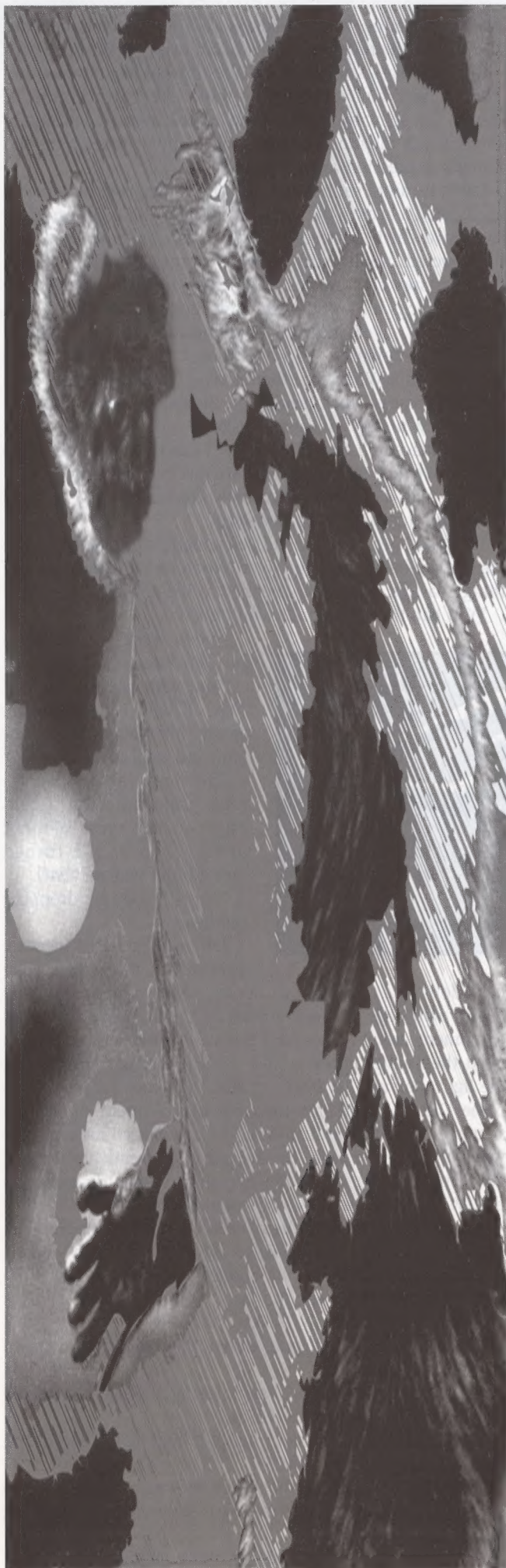
The storms grew more violent. Each evening they were more tumultuous. With them came winds that swept around the campsite. Once the tarpaulin over the cooking area was snatched away and flung into the riverside trees. Day by day, the river rose until all the rocks were submerged and the sound of the thundering water became a constant backdrop. Occasionally, amidst the booming lightning and hammering rain, you could catch the distant crack of a tree falling beneath the weight of the elements.

Late one afternoon I was standing looking at the swirling channel that my swimming pool had become when the faintest shaking of leaves across the water caught my eye. After a minute or so, I glimpsed a gibbon moving gingerly about. I soon lost track of it. After that, most of the times I was by the river I would see what I thought was some shape or some sign in the motion of the leaves. Once, I pointed it out to Jenny.

"I know," was all she said.

The researchers who were supposed to be coming were late. Jeff radioed the logging camp and eventually established that they had been delayed by local bureaucracy. They would be a few days yet, perhaps more than a week. I suffered a twinge of apprehension. I wanted them to come, I realised. I felt a tension building beneath the simple surface of each day and night. Jenny was becoming quiet, almost distant; we did not let her wander away from the camp alone, but she hovered for long periods on the edge of the forest. She had begun to talk in her sleep — mumbled sentences I could not make out. Her tone was never suggestive of nightmare, so I did not wake her. When I asked her what she dreamed of, she would say she did not remember. I too was sleeping increasingly badly. The rain was louder in the night than it had been, and when it stopped, the insects replaced it with their own cacophony. That too seemed greater than before. I imagined swarms of them moving out of the forest and pressing against the walls of the hut. Half-recalled dreams would cling to me each time I woke in the darkness: of vegetation, of being lost, of being the object of some gaze. And, though I said nothing to Jeff, I was sure that each morning when I awoke to the sound of gibbons, their songs were a little closer.





Two days after we heard that the researchers were delayed, I woke late. It was full daylight outside. I struggled out of the hammock, stretching the stiffness out of my limbs. Jenny was sitting on the veranda.

"Where's Daddy?" I asked.

"He went to listen to the gibbons," she said.

When he came back, Jeff was uneasy. He spoke softly to me out of Jenny's earshot. "I can't work out what's going on," he said. "They're definitely closer. Have you noticed?"

I nodded.

"All of them, that's the strange thing," he said. "They're moving out of their territories, coming in towards the camp. It really shouldn't be happening. They're strongly territorial. I'm getting more and more animals in the traps, too. There was a rat in every one of them this morning. The same yesterday. And..." He hesitated, glancing at me as if he was embarrassed. "I'm sure it's just me not paying attention, but I can't find some of the trails. It's as if they've grown over."

I looked across at Jenny. She sat, her chin in her hands, looking into the forest. "Do you think she's all right?" I said, and regretted it instantly.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. She just seems to be acting a little strange. It's nothing."

Jeff let it go. "There must be some explanation," he said. "It's probably perfectly normal. Maybe the rats are just coming in for food. We should be tidier."

"And the gibbons?" I asked.

"Don't know. Must be something straightforward." He grunted with halfhearted amusement. "Never a primatologist around when you need one. Why don't you boil up some water for tea?"

I went across to light one of the stoves. As I filled a pan with water I noticed that Jeff was still standing where I had left him. He was watching Jenny. When he saw me looking, he smiled. He shook his head slightly and wandered off. After lunch, he checked over the engine on the boat.

We ate almost without speaking that evening. Jenny left most of her food — rice and sardines — on the plate. I asked her if she felt ill, but she said she was fine.

Afterwards I set her to washing the dishes. It began to rain. Jeff and I went into the hut. He knelt by the radio, trying to raise the logging camp but finding only static. I sat on a hammock and watched for a few minutes as he ranged across frequencies. Eventually he gave up.

"Must be atmospheric," he said, sounding less than convinced.

"It's not broken?" I asked.

"No. The set's working fine. I'll try again later." He stayed there, kneeling on the floor, seemingly lost in thought.

"What do you dream about?" I asked after a moment's hesitation.

He looked at me, a puzzled expression on his face. "How do you mean?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Nothing. I just wondered if your dreams had changed."

He raised his eyebrows and shook his head slightly. Part of me had hoped he might be dreaming as I was.

"You?" he asked.

"I dream about the forest."

He looked almost relieved. "Well, that's not surprising. An unfamiliar environment and all that."

I regarded my hands resting lightly in my lap. "It feels more than that."

"We're all a bit tense," he said. "I'm sure that's all there is to it. Look, the rain's getting heavy. Let's help Jenny."



Suddenly there were gibbons singing. A whole chorus of them, more than I had ever heard at one time.

"They don't sing in the evening," said Jeff in a disbelieving voice.

"Jenny," I said.

She was at the edge of the clearing, facing outward, on the brink of the forest. She was naked. Her clothes lay at her feet. Her hair clung to her head and neck. Rainwater poured down her back. She held her arms out, splayed her fingers, turned her palms slightly so that they angled up to the canopy. Somewhere very close in the trees, the gibbons were singing, their voices blurred together by the downpour.

Jeff shouted and ran to her, gathered her up and carried her back to the hut. The song ended. We wrapped her in a towel and knelt before her. I tried to dry her hair.

"What did you think you were doing?" cried Jeff, taking her hands in his.

She was unconcerned. "They were singing to me."

"What are you talking about?" Jeff said.

"They just came to look. They called to me."

"No," snapped Jeff, squeezing her hands. "Don't be silly. They're wild animals."

I loosened his grip on her. "It's all right," I said. "It's all right."

Jenny looked into his eyes. "You don't understand," she said. And then she would say no more.

The mark the forest leaves in the mind is that of the outsider. The birds, the insects, the gibbons, will sing on after you are gone. The forest's secrets are inaccessible to those who merely pass through. It seems to me now that those secrets lie buried not in the mechanisms and processes by which its patterns may be described, but in its unity, its self-possession. We cannot understand that through examination, and our civilised imagination is unequal to other understandings. Except, perhaps, when we are children.

I barely slept. I feared what might happen if I did. I could hear Jenny's voice, barely audible in the darkness. I had taken down the screen between our hammocks so that I could watch her, but it was too dark to see anything but the vague shape of her weight in the hammock. It rained all through the night. Around dawn, I woke with a start. My mosquito net seemed tangled about my feet somehow, and I kicked to free it. Jenny was murmuring in her sleep — a barely audible whisper in which I could make out no words. Rubbing my eyes, I crossed to her hammock, treading carefully in the near-darkness. Her breathy voice sped on as I stood over her. I could not make out her features, but she did not sound upset or afraid. I bent closer to try to catch what she was saying. As I did so, I heard a faint rustle, and I turned my head. I watched as, imprecisely silhouetted against the first grey hint of daylight, a vine unrolled itself across the open doorway of the hut. It was a lazy, animal movement like someone stretching their arm after waking. In the next moment it was still, hanging there across the opening. Jenny gave out a long sigh and opened her eyes.

The forest had reached out in the night and embraced our cabin. From the edge of the clearing tendrils of vegetation

had spread across the ground and risen up to cloak the walls and roof of the building. At the front, over the veranda, only a few limp stems hung down like tropical decorations, but the rear wall and much of the roof were a dense mass of leaves. Jeff spent an hour cutting it back, sweating profusely even though the morning was cool. Jenny watched him with a blank expression as he worked.

Later, he and I sat beneath the tarpaulins, watching her as she floated leaves in the puddles that now dotted the ground. The bare earth between the huts had become mud and unexpected clouds still billowed across the sky. Distant thunder spoke of storms continuing upriver. There were animal tracks all around the campsite. Jeff had found sign of deer, pig, civet, monkey, bear and cat, all intermingled.

"We'll go downriver this afternoon," he said. "Wait at the logging camp. When the others arrive, I'll come up here with them. I'll just get them settled in, then come back to you."

"Can't you stay with us?" I asked.

He grimaced. "I can't," he said. "I can't just send them up here. There'll be an explanation, we just need to figure it out."

There was tension in his voice. He was hiding it, but I knew him too well to be deceived.

We called Jenny over, and Jeff quietly explained that we were going back down the river. When he told her to get her things packed away, tears peared at the corner of her eyes.

"You can't," she said. "I won't go."

"Now, honey..." I began, but Jeff interrupted.

"You will," he said tightly. "We all will. No arguments, Jenny. Just you pack up your stuff and we'll go after lunch."

She stared at him, seemingly calm but with a cold anger in her eyes. Without another word, she turned around and walked away.

"Jesus," said Jeff, dropping his head.

Jeff and I gathered together everything we would take

back down the river with us. Jenny, silently ignoring us, saw to her own bags. As Jeff secured all the scientific and other equipment around the camp the wind rose and the clouds piled themselves darker above us. The treetops rustled and the light took on that heavy quality that warns of a storm to come. Often I would have the sense of movement, or of some shape, at the edge of the forest, but whenever I looked there was nothing to be seen. By late morning, Jenny and I could do no more. We sat on the hut's veranda, with our bags beside us. We did not speak — she would not look at me.

Jeff had gone down to the river to check the boat one final time. He returned looking tense and distracted. He glanced uneasily at Jenny before he spoke to me. "The river's too high," he said. "It's risen too fast."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I don't think I could get us down. The rapids downstream will be too high."

"But we're ready to go," I said, feeling foolish, but unable to keep the fear out of my voice.

"I know, for Christ's sake," he said, holding his hands out, "but we can't. It's not safe."

"But..." I said, aware that there was something close to pleading in my tone and in my eyes, "But what are we going to do?"

"I don't know," he said. Then, more gently, "Wait."





**"We should eat," Jeff said around midday.**

Heavier rain was falling now — thunder that had been far away in the morning was drawing closer by the minute. We had not moved from the veranda of the hut.

"Really, we should..." he said, but snapped his head around before he could finish. Almost at once he looked back again and met my eyes for an instant. I knew what he had seen — one of the vague shapes moving amongst the trees just out of clear sight.

Then he cocked his head slightly, frowning.

"What?" I asked.

"Is the river sounding louder to you?"

I shrugged. I could not make it out clearly above the sound of rain on the roof.

"I'll go and have a look," he said, and ducked out into the rain. I leaned out from beneath the sheltering roof and peered up at the sky. There was no sign of a break in the leaden clouds. The sky had a grim, angry look. I heard Jeff shouting my name.

"Wait here," I said to Jenny and ran to the river. The rocks we had swum from must have been six feet beneath the surface of the torrent. Jeff was up to his knees in the foaming water, clinging with one hand to a low branch, hauling with the other on the rope that was attached to the prow of the boat. The small tree it had been anchored to had almost come out of the bank, the soil around its roots melting away. Jeff looked over his shoulder and I could see the strain in his face.

"Help me pull it up," he said, the control in his voice surprising me. "We've got to get it up the bank."

I moved to go down to him. The branch he was holding snapped. His feet went from under him and he slid soundlessly down into the river. The rope tightened and eased the tree out of the earth — the boat spun away downstream.

Jeff's head broke the surface ten yards down the bank and he grabbed at vines trailing in the water, pulling himself part-way out of the river.

"Jeff," I shouted, pushing through the undergrowth to get to him. I leant against the thick trunk of an old, twisted tree and stretched out my hand.

"Can you take my weight?" he asked.

"Yes. Take my hand, for God's sake."

I heard the gibbons as Jeff came free of the water. They were almost lost in the sound of the rain and river, but their voices sent a shiver through me. I turned too quickly, slipping and almost falling back. Jeff was struggling to his feet at my side, but he was out of my thoughts now.

"Jenny," I said, then shouted her name again as I scrambled back up the bank. My feet went from under me again as I came up into the clearing. I clawed at the slick earth, digging furrows in it with my fingers. I glimpsed Jenny running beyond the huts, disappearing into the green and shadows. I could hear Jeff coming up behind me.

I did not look at him, but shouted "She's gone," as I rose and ran after her: across the clearing, between the huts, to the trees. I almost paused there — the space beneath the vaulting branches seemed darker, more unwelcoming, than ever before — but I plunged on and passed into the forest. Behind me, I heard Jeff calling for her a couple of times, but he seemed to be moving in a different direction and his voice faded. I was alone, but somewhere up ahead I could still hear gibbons singing high in the storm.

Perhaps there is something, in some of us, that calls out to things we have forgotten. Or perhaps there are thoughts running deep in the veins of the world that stir occasionally

and rouse themselves to look upon us. I do not know, but I wonder. Now, after it all, I do little else but wonder.

As I ran, not knowing where I was going, I shouted her name over and over. I knew I might be lost but that thought was overwhelmed by fear for my child, by the certainty that something potent had shaped itself out of the trees and the earth. I came without warning to the lip of a broad, steep-sided gully. I stumbled and fell to my knees, driving my hands deep into the leaf litter. Below, a boulder-strewn stream rushed down towards the river. Jenny was standing beside me. She was looking up.

The trees on the far side of the gully were hung with animals: not just gibbons, but monkeys, squirrels, birds and other stranger things. They hardly moved, shifting only slightly now and again, but they watched. A huge black bird with a massive club of a bill glided in through the rain and settled upon a branch. A few feet to the left, a great cat was stretched along a bough, its eyes fixed upon me.

I knelt there for long moments unable to rise, unable to bring my thoughts into any order. Jenny did not move. I locked my gaze upon her, focusing, trying to shut out my awareness of the watching animals.

"Jenny," I said. "Come away."

She did not seem to hear me, nor yet to know I was there.

"Jenny," I shouted, reaching for her. "Come with me."

My hand closed about her wrist and she turned her head to look at me. "Hello," she said.

I stood up unsteadily, keeping hold of her arm. "We have to go back. We can't stay."

"It's all right," she said. "I'm not afraid."

Something in the way she said it closed my mind for a moment. "What?" I said.

"Where's Daddy?" she asked and the fear was back like a stone in my throat. From somewhere not far away came the sound of a cannon. Not thunder; something else.

Again I ran. I dragged Jenny along behind me. Leaves, branches lashed at my face. I raised my arm before me and pushed on. I lost hold of Jenny, but I knew now that no harm would come to her. I ran blindly until I reached a rise in the ground. I stood at the edge of a shallow bowl, gasping, sobbing, and felt a lurching nausea take hold in my stomach.

Jeff lay beneath a dead tree that had torn itself out of the side of the bowl. His legs were crushed beneath the main trunk. The thin stub of a branch, the bark long gone and the hard wood beneath exposed, had driven through his chest, staking him into the ground. Barbed tendrils had tightened about his outstretched arm, cutting through his shirt. Their strength was pulling his arm into the ground. The earth had parted and almost closed again over his hand, so that only the tips of his fingers showed.

"Where's Daddy?" I heard Jenny say behind me. I turned and swept her up in my arms, but before I lifted her and pressed her face into my shoulder and carried her away, she saw.

**I came out of the forest like that: hugging her, enclosing her.** I staggered and slid in the mud the rain had created. The wind had stripped away the canopy over the cooking area, overturned the tables and strewn pots and pans and food across the campsite. I fell to my knees. My strength was gone and all I could do was crush Jenny to me. The rain pounded my back.

I stayed like that for a time, then took Jenny into our hut. She was limp, as if asleep, though her eyes were open. I laid her in her hammock, and found I was shaking. I stared at my hands, covered in mud, bits of leaves and bloody scratches.



They trembled uncontrollably. I made fists of them. Outside, the rain was stopping and the wind falling away. Jenny started to cry. I touched her shoulder, but she was asleep — crying in her sleep. The sound of insects was rising from the trees outside. My stomach lurched and I stumbled to the door of the hut and vomited. After that, I lay on the floor beneath Jenny's hammock, and curled myself up into a ball and pressed my hands over my ears.

I woke long after dawn. I had eventually passed into sleep there, on the hard floor of the hut. Jenny was breathing deeply and slowly now, looking like any sleeping child. I went stiffly out onto the veranda. The air was sharp and bright, as if the storm had washed it clean. I heard a voice. The shouting had woken me, I knew then. There were people coming up from the river. White men in shorts wearing hats. They waved to me. Sallem was with them, but he was not waving. He was looking out amongst the trees.

"Are you all right?" they shouted. "Where's Jeff?"

"In the forest," I told them. I started to cry then, and could not stop for a long time.

I took Jenny, for I could not be parted from her, and two of the scientists came with us. I was in a daze. The forest felt empty. There were birds and insects singing, somewhere far away a pair of gibbons, but they were just animals. Nothing more.

I held Jenny's hand tightly in mine as I led them along the trails. She still had not spoken and I had not pressed her. I did not recognise my path, but knew in any case where I was going. When we were close I gestured them on and waited with Jenny while they went forward. After a moment they beckoned me to join them.

"He's not here," one of them said.

The tree lay where it had been. Beneath it there was nothing but a mass of creepers and leaves as if it had fallen across a particularly thick patch of undergrowth.

"Perhaps he got out," said one of the scientists.

I shook my head.

**They searched anyway. They brought villagers up and spread them out through the forest. They said Jenny and I should go downriver to see a doctor, and seemed almost surprised when I agreed. They crammed us into a boat with some of our belongings, and one of them clambered in to go down with us. In a bright, warm morning the boatman steered us out into the middle of the river.**

When the camp lay barely half an hour behind us I saw a shape on the riverbank. It seemed to be a human figure: a man standing in the shade at the edge of the forest, half-obscured by the undergrowth and overhanging branches. His arm was upraised as if he was waving to us.

I started to turn to the boatman, to tell him to pull in. Then I heard Jenny softly say, "Oh."

When I looked back to the bank I could see that the figure was fraying at the edges: breaking into fragments of shadow and light, like leaves blown by a soft wind. The disintegration rushed ahead and the shape suddenly scattered into a thousand little pieces that swung out over the river. Butterflies. A great sweep of glittering wings that streamed out over the water towards us and then rolled up and dived back amongst the trees. They vanished into the forest. I stared for a few moments. Jenny, nestled against my side, was looking too.

"Goodbye," she said quietly.

'Gibbons' is a result of three months Brian spent in the rainforests of Borneo way back in 1989. It's only his second published story — the first appeared in *Interzone* about five years ago.





Remember libraries? Remember them as a place of quiet research or contemplation? The hushed cathedral of learning of yesteryear is these days more likely to resound to the braying and cussing of uncouth teenagers bragging about their latest apocryphal exploits – the street slang for this is ‘study time’ or ‘a study period’ – or else the downstairs area is packed full of whining toddlers as lugubrious Uncle Fun, children’s entertainer, folds another pair of balloons into – guess what? A sausage dog!

Everywhere moves on, I suppose, even if the dodo doesn’t want it to. Make a space in your lives for quietude. Silence, if you can manage it. But how and where? When I was a kid you hardly dared breathe in my local book shop, so awed and reverential was the atmosphere. However, a fad which has crept into book stores and departments during the past decade or so has been to play ‘background’ music. For whose benefit? Surely not the customer’s. At first, in the wake of the mega-success of the film *Amadeus*, it was mostly light classical – ‘Piano Concerto No 21 in C’ or ‘Pastoral Symphony’ – and, to an extent, somewhat unobtrusive. Nowadays, whatever is currently deemed cool or camp by the body-pierced assistants is what’s likely to be slapped on the turntable. *Abba*-bleeding-*Gold*, for example. I’m sorry but if I’ve gone to peruse and purchase a book of Platonic philosophy or an anthology of the War Poets I don’t want to have to put up with ‘Mama Mia’ or ‘Ring Ring’! I’ll get confused and end up buying some TV spin-off ‘written’ by Zoe Ball or Ainsley Harriott.

So there you are, sitting at home brushing up on Socratic discourse theory, when



## the dodo has landed

Allen  
Ashley

Being Taurean  
and therefore  
keen on the  
earthly pleasures,  
the dodo finds  
many natural  
noises quite  
pleasurable: the  
restfulness of the  
wind through the  
meadow grass or  
the rhythmic  
crash of the  
waves reminding  
us of the comfort  
of the womb.  
However...

suddenly there’s a dopplering effect from outside and it’s heading this way! You duck under the table but it’s just as loud there. There’s no escape from this aural bomb pulsing down your street, shaking the walls to their foundations, withering windows and eardrums in its wake.

Saddam’s super gunners have discovered where you live! It’s the end of civilisation as we know it. But wait – the booming sound has peaked, the pounding bass is bouncing off into the distance. You can come out now, it’s safe. For a while. In truth, it wasn’t the Iraqis but Gaz, Spaz or Leon in his black windowed Gti reminding the world how small his brain or penis is and how he likes to compensate with this regular moveable sonic attack against the neighbours.

Seriously, now, shouldn’t there be some sort of decibel limit imposed on car stereo systems? It’s certainly uncivilised. Distinctly unsafe, too. He wasn’t drunk, m’lud, but the constant ‘dum-dum duff-duff-duff-duff’ had rendered him oblivious to all other traffic, pedestrians and road hazards.

Don’t get me wrong: I love music. I can regularly be spotted strolling the cockney sparrer streets of the East End with my Walkman and I’ve moshed it up at Foo Fighters and Radiohead gigs. But all that’s through choice. Right place, right time.

I was (still am, actually) part of a writers’ group occasionally referred to as ‘the usual suspects’. For a while we met at a pub in Victoria. The problem was that we had to compete with an in-house sound system blaring out music for the benefit of the muscular and somewhat unpleasant staff. No, maybe they weren’t that rude really, just rather hard of hearing due to self-inflicted over-exposure.

Now, if I want my delicate ear drums to be assailed by that hammer and drill percussive nonsense so beloved by some of the younger fraternity, I’ll go to a Ministry of Neanderthals club, thank you very much. As a *business* move, such an aural assault is counter-productive in the end: we were driven away to somewhere else where we could listen to each other. As much as any writer listens to another...

Being Taurean and therefore keen on the earthly pleasures, the dodo, in fact, finds many natural noises quite pleasurable: the restfulness of the wind through the meadow grass or the rhythmic crash of the waves reminding us of the comfort of the womb. However...

Talking tube trains! There’s another needless noise polluting modern urban life: ‘The next station is... Change here for...’. We *can* read maps, you know. And if we can’t we shouldn’t be allowed out on our own to be cared for by the community.

Is nothing going to stop the spread of this unpalatable pollutant? At football grounds they’ve recently adopted this totally unnecessary business of greeting goals with music. Wimbledon started it as a bit of a deliberate joke so that was just about okay but the practice was taken up at several games during the France 98 World Cup and even Tottenham now do this when they manage a rare home goal! Stop this madness, all of you! Goals should be greeted with manic cheering, disgusted booing or stunned silence. We don’t need all this centralised control and regulation of our lives, all this telling us how to feel, all this muzak intended to design our mood.

Resist. Make more noise than these fascists.

Better still, get them to shut the fuck up.





**These days Michael Moorcock lives in Austin, Texas with his wife Linda.**

The move across the Atlantic appears not to have mellowed him — his analysis of American society is as penetrating and entertaining as that he applied to the British scene for so many years:

‘The people with power in many areas of corporate America are as thick as shit, parroting a parody of the old Democrat-Republican vocabulary and selling the whole farce to the public via its huge media empires. I’ve hobnobbed with some of these bastards: they have no culture but the culture of appetite. Coca Cola, American Express, Dupont — for them money really is the only measure of morality.’

In spite of a disarming openness about his life, beliefs and work, Moorcock remains an enigmatic figure. It’s no surprise to find contradictions in a career spanning 40 years and more than 70 novels. But paradox is integral to his monumental body of work, described by the late Angela Carter as “a vast morality play of the battle between good and evil...the nearest thing we have in modern English fiction to a never-ending carnival”.

Moorcock wants to be a popular writer, but few trample down the fences between “popular” and “literary” fiction with such gusto. A relentless experimenter with language, form and technique who spends years researching and crafting structurally ambitious and morally complex books, he remains best known for the extravagant plotting and outrageous imagery of his baroque sword and sorcery sequences. He’s an anarchist, feminist and fiercely indignant expositor of the follies, cruelties and inequities of our age — but insists there is little direct propaganda or political allegory in his fiction. The author of in-your-face polemical essays like *Retreat from Liberty* doesn’t see morality and politics as mere material for his stories. I ask Moorcock to clarify the link between his beliefs and his fiction.

‘I don’t mix my ordinary political life with my work. I find Kropotkin’s idealism and logic useful for keeping my own moral perspective. For me, anarchism isn’t a system, it’s a state of mind. My kind of anarchism is idealistic, altruistic and — to a degree — abstract: it comes out of observations made in my work rather than the other way around. This is also true of my feminism. I don’t really need these systems of thought and action — ways of navigating the real world — for my fiction. In *King of the City*, the book I’m engaged with at the moment, I’m gradually cutting out political and social criticism in favour of demonstration. The criticism’s usually only there in the first draft.’

But if he resists the temptation to promote particular political philosophies in his stories, he rarely misses an opportunity for forensic examination of the way the world is run. So what does he see as the key issues relating to the use and abuse of power?

‘The greatest injustices are committed by nations and governments with the most wealth and power, since they have the means to check themselves and set an example — as South Africa does in *The Warlord of the Air* [the first of Moorcock’s trilogy of *Oswald Bastable* alternative history novels]. But economically and politically advanced nations have come increasingly under the control of Big Business, which is now nothing but naked appetite and brute aggression — the Grand Consumer. It’s become a matter of urgency to confront and modify this power which is all but insensate (especially with the likes of Murdoch and Gates) and represents a completely irrational will to conquest and control. The aggression coming out of the US East Coast and City of London is infantile and self-destructive.’

Jerry Cornelius has been Moorcock’s most durable means of examining the world’s horrors, lunacies and moral dilemmas. The stories are characterised by episodic and fragmented narrative structures; the synthesis of elements from popular genres (fantasy, science fiction, wisecracking comedy, war story, gothic horror and the spy thriller); the use of found materials (snatches of song lyrics, newspaper stories, academic papers, advertisements and magazine trivia); and an ironic, often opaque, response to their thematic material. This strange cargo of disparate elements has enabled an investigation of contemporary trends, events and people more incisive than anything you’ll find in a traditional social novel.

For 30 years Jerry has illustrated subjects as diverse as the link between conspicuous consumerism and spurious radicalism in the 1960s; American imperialism in Vietnam and — more recently — in the Middle East; Margaret Thatcher’s bizarre vision of herself as England’s moral saviour; and media

by  
**ANDREW  
HEDGECOCK**



manipulation of the public reaction to the death of Princess Diana. In spite of these specific points of reference, the best Cornelius stories haven't dated. I ask Jerry's creator how his approach to writing them has changed over the years:

'I needed an adaptable, non-linear medium which could examine ideas and personalities from a million different perspectives. To some extent Cornelius is a

technique rather than a character and it remains responsive to current stimuli. I'm proud that most of the "issues" I've dealt with in the stories — although often rooted in a very specific time period — remain vital. Certain exemplary events inform my work: Jerry came to moral maturity during the Vietnam war and, recently, Dianamania and the American assault on a Sudanese pharmaceutical plant have given me something to write about. But my understanding of the forces and tensions at work in society doesn't change very much.'

Nor do the forces and tensions themselves, it seems. The key concerns of Cornelius short stories from the late 1960s/early 1970s (collected in *The Lives and Times of Jerry Cornelius*, 1976) are still relevant at the fag end of the century: the imposition of grotesque ideologies by authoritarian politicians, racism, sexism, imperialism and the thrills and traumas of technological change.



## MICHAEL MOORCOCK: CONFRONTING THE GRAND CONSUMER

If these concerns are so enduring, is there any point in addressing them in fiction? Dickens's portrayal of Wackford Squeers in *Nicholas Nickleby* brought libel writs from Yorkshire schoolmasters and fuelled demands for educational reform. Consider two of the finest exposés of the self-obsession, greed and hypocrisy of Thatcher's Britain: Iain Sinclair's *Downriver* (1991) and Moorcock's novella *The Alchemist's Question* (1984). But what response — if any — did they elicit from their readers? Baroness Thatcher fades from public consciousness while her ideas simmer away in newspaper columns, boardroom discussions and party manifestos. Little has changed. So what is the purpose of sociopolitical satire in fiction? Should it inspire social change or merely draw readers' attention to injustice?

'I'm not sure that much of what I do is satire. Pasquinade? Lampoon? Moral farce? What books can do is reinforce the reader's own judgment and ideals. They don't make many converts but they can help people take action. And every writer who takes on that kind of responsibly is helping towards the chance of creating a relatively sane and just world. I've never seen much politically engaged work anyway. We're getting a raft of mild satires worthy of the 1950s, like Julian Barnes's *England England*, but David Britton's *Lord Horror* is still out there stropping like billy-o.'

Gender politics are an abiding interest. *The Adventures of Una Persson and Catherine Cornelius in the Twentieth Century* (1976) examines the arbitrary power (political, economic and physical) men wield over women, and the tendency for some women revolutionaries to adopt the rhetoric, attitudes and methods of their oppressors. In *The Brothel in Rosenstrasse* (1982), a vivid and elegantly controlled study of erotomania, his concerns include the dangers of self obsession and power-seeking in sexual relationships. I ask Moorcock if the work of particular feminist writers has influenced his own.

'My interest in feminism goes back a long way. I remember suggesting to Rosie Boycott when she was working for *Frendz* that she didn't have to be the typist — she was using my typewriter at the time. Over the years I've admired lots of feminist



writers — Robin Morgan, Niki Craft, Beatrice Campbell and Andrea Dworkin: their work hasn't much influenced mine, but it's strengthened my understanding of the issues.'

Moorcock has written extensively on pornography and supports anti-pornography legislation along the lines of the Dworkin/MacKinnon Bill proposed in the US. He sees the issue as one of sex discrimination rather than censorship, but isn't his commitment to supporting legal constraints on pornographers hard to square with his equally robust opposition to censorship?

'Not at all. We must get rid of the Obscene Publications Act and make it possible for those who believe themselves to be harmed by pornography to challenge the pornographers in court. People say this is back door censorship — in which case so is the Race Relations Act. Sometimes justice can only be achieved by a certain route and if the greater justice is served then it's justified. It would say we understand pornography to be harmful in certain contexts. "Erotica" couldn't be challenged and neither could political satire like *Lord Horror*. But we're dealing with strong feelings, deep additions and complicated passions — and people go crazy if they think their particular thing is going to be "stopped". Unfortunately the likes of Jack Straw can only think in authoritarian terms around these issues, as we've seen from his ludicrous stance on drugs.'

Over the years Moorcock — like his friend Iain Sinclair — has been obsessed by the demands and possibilities of city life in general, and life in London in particular. His epic fantasies and alternate histories are crammed with brilliantly imagined cities, and the Cornelius books can be read as visionary urban survival manuals. But his most engaging city is the London of *Mother London* (1988). This dense and multilayered book, charting the stories of a group of psychiatric outpatients from the Blitz to the 1980s, is a visionary celebration of the adaptability and vitality of London's people, landscape, history and mythology. Then there are the re-imagined Londons of Dickens, Gissing, Conrad, Kersh, Hamilton, Waugh, Carter, Sinclair, Petit... Why has the city inspired such distinguished work?

'London is the most advanced city in the world. In spite of marginal crime, it remains one of the safest cities of its size and one of the most fundamentally civilised. It's huge but coherent and profoundly varied organism. What's more, you could argue that the bigger a city is, the more stories it has.'

Moorcock honours the democratic spirit of Londoners — and their ability to resist the prevailing authoritarianism of the political scene — in many of his stories and essays. But where does his durable optimism about their will to self-determination and essential fairness spring from?

'Their culture is so deeply libertarian that they can take control of themselves whenever they wish. Before the Blitz, the government assumed panic would sweep the city when the German bombers came. They planned for emergency camps around the green belt and for the mass treatment of shell-shock. They made no provision for people deciding to stay, fight back, take control and save their city. That's an authentic part of my own history: my optimism is based on solid experience, so I've no reason to suspect it. City dwellers have to be more democratic to survive. In future we'll need increasingly responsive and responsible elected administrations — and any hints of paternalism or authoritarianism must be thoroughly attacked. The main threats to a more democratic London are the short-sighted money-grubbers who need to be driven out of the city with sharp sticks.'

Moorcock's most dazzling feat of myth mongering — the richly inventive *Between the Wars* series — is a fictional history of the political failures, lunatic ideologies and tragic abuses of power of the twentieth century. The books explore the development of fascism and the Jewish holocaust through the unreliable (and self-deceiving) memoirs of the self-styled "Colonel" Pyat — a treacherous hypocrite, snob, charlatan, racist and cocaine addict.

The narrative — part historical novel, part picaresque adventure story — is packed with tragic betrayals and comic buffoonery: it takes Pyat from childhood in pre-Revolutionary Russia to bitter exile in 1970s Notting Hill. To date, Moorcock has completed three novels of this projected tetralogy (*Byzantium Endures*, 1981; *The Laughter of Carthage*, 1984; and *Jerusalem Commands*, 1992). The final book (*The Vengeance of Rome*) is proving an emotionally draining experience. No wonder: it takes Pyat and his author into the century's heart of darkness — Hitler's "Final Solution".

'I was struggling with the scenes in the concentration camps. I've now decided on a slightly different approach, making little direct reference to most of what went on there: that gets me over the moral hurdle of not wanting to use another person's authentic experience in my novel. They're still hard scenes to write,

'Publishers are desperately casting around for another *Trainspotting* to sell in the record stores: but if I was 18 I wouldn't be seen dead in one of those comfy escape hatches selling coffee and pastry to middle-class social incompetents'



involving perversity and filthy ideas. It's all the more exhausting because I have to get into the characters of the Nazis from their own viewpoint and make the scenes with Hitler credible.'

In spite of the demands of the subject matter, something compelled Moorcock to tackle it. So was it a sense that we're not yet free of the psychological fallout of these terrible events, or a feeling that we're all too likely to find ourselves facing the same set of horrors in the near future?

'I decided to write about the Holocaust after looking at various, mainly Jewish, fictional attempts to deal with it. Some tosh by Leon Uris on tv made me decide I wanted to write about how the whole western and middle-eastern world had conspired in the Holocaust and how it had come about historically. That's why I set *Byzantium Endures* beyond the Pale — in Ukraine — to begin with. Bolshevism created Nazism. Without one we would never have had the other in any significant form. I'm always surprised that the lessons of the 1930s haven't really been learned: I suppose most people have poor imaginations — they think because something hasn't happened to them, it won't happen to them. No thinking German feels easy — and no Jew feels safe. God knows what new horrors people can come up with.'

And there are other difficulties when writers tackle such emotionally resonant subject matter. Valentine Cunningham's TLS review of *The Laughter of Carthage* ignored the book's ironic tone and implied the author shared Pyat's repellent views. So how does Moorcock react to being damned for the sins of a fictional character? And does he worry that Pyat might be subject to the "Alf Garnett" effect — becoming, for misguided readers, a heroic symbol of the very views the author set out to lampoon?

'When *Byzantium Endures* came out in France one publisher said "I'll never publish that right wing bastard again". And there were journalists who seem to have liked the book because Pyat was saying things they'd like to say for real. The other problem is that people get irritated by irony, thinking you're trying to get away with saying bad things and pretending they're funny. That's linear thinkers for you. But by and large I've rarely had seriously askew criticism of my ironic novels.'

Moorcock's reading tour of *Jerusalem Commands* featured his friend, actor and comedian Freddy Earle as Pyat, while the author played himself, expressing his disapproval of the words he'd put in Pyat's mouth.

'Freddie played a perfect Pyat and it worked well most of the time. In Manchester one little old Jewish lady got up at the end and asked "What have you got against the Jews?". But, generally speaking, the Jewish people in the audience got it very quickly — as did most others.'

Moorcock's editorship of *New Worlds* in the 1960s encouraged innovative fictional exploration of contemporary morality, psychology, sexuality and politics. But 30 years on, I suggest, the future for radical literature looks bleak. The criticism of the academic establishment is increasingly narrow and prescriptive, publishers are more obsessed than ever with marketing niches and writers themselves have a more careerist outlook. Moorcock rejects my pessimism.

'There's always been an academic establishment — it's best ignored. If you think publishers have repressive control over readers and writers, read a history of Bentley or Mudie. They insisted on the three volume novel. George Eliot complained of having to write the "middle volume" of *Adam Bede* — and the effect of this is noticeable for the reader. It's all relative. The situation can be miserable for ambitious writers — but who ever said you were going to make money and become famous in your lifetime by being William Blake? I could make a comfortable living cloning Elric — but don't choose to, but others might.'

So, what of the future? Where should we look for new writers who can map out the contemporary sociopolitical landscape?

'Publishers are desperately casting around for another *Trainspotting* to sell in the record stores: but if I was 18 I wouldn't be seen dead in one of those comfy escape hatches selling coffee and pastry to middle-class social incompetents. I'd be trying to find what I wanted on the Internet and getting hold of it as best I could. So look to the Internet for the next generation of hip writers. Authors should expect to bypass publishers, develop their own rules, find their own markets and to present their stuff to a public that wants it. They shouldn't expect to make money. Last time I was in London all the lively stuff was happening in the margins — while at the centre there was the usual sweetish, rotten odour of decayed crap. Nothing worth seeing in the West End, but lots happening in the boroughs. Ultimately the centre will collapse, leaving a vacuum which the more dynamic margins fill. It happened like that in the 1960s.' □

Michael Moorcock is currently working on a new novel, *King of the City*, and a short trilogy featuring *Elric*, the psychologically scarred warrior king of his best known sword and sorcery cycle.





*'Illness is the night-side of life...' Susan Sontag*

**Deep in illusion's halls, Serena dreams of Cassini:**

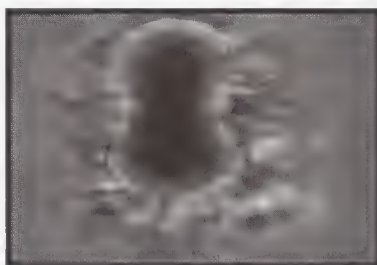
imagining him hastening through the city, not risking the underground, heading east towards the Docklands. Serena shivers then, thinking of night and the cold, and the dream is abruptly banished. She rises from the couch, walks to the window and stares out across London. The triple glazing reflects the lights of the city in a series of trinities: endless refraction, eternally fractured. Beyond the curve of the Thames she can see snow clouds massing, their summits lit by the moon. Below, London sleeps, and to Serena's artificially stimulated imagination the whole city is visible: the fortresses of the Docklands, and beyond them the protective wall which rings the city as far as Dartford. And after that lies the unimaginable wasteland of flood and fen and ruin, which Serena has never seen and hopes she never will. The city is frightening enough. Serena knows, deep in her heart, that the European Empire is entering its last days, sealed off by the constant encroach of winter, and she knows, too, that the masques and balls and parties of which her peers are so enamoured are no more than the last flickers of the sun, before summer goes out like a candle. She hides such knowledge away in the secret places of the head, drowning it in dreams.

Crossing her fingers in the folds of her pashmina robe, Serena prays to the Virgin that Cassini will come back safely. As she prays, she holds her breath, and the effort makes her cough, racking her lungs with fire until a single drop of blood stains the soft folds of her robe. *Stigmata*, she thinks, *for luck*, and turns back to the winter city, waiting for the masque and Cassini's midnight gift.

She has felt a little better today, only occasionally tasting the flat salt blood of haemorrhage in her mouth, but she

has nearly finished this month's supply of the preparation. Opening the padded box, she gazes down at the last little phial. It's almost three-quarters full; Serena has been saving it for the masque tonight. She'll be appearing in front of London's highest society, so it's vital that she looks her best. Besides, it's Christmas Day tomorrow and Cassini, moved by an uncharacteristic whim, has promised to supply her with more of the preparation as a kind of Christmas present. Serena will still be paying for it, and it isn't cheap, but she supposes that it's a kind thought.

She has spent the past few days thinking about Cassini, and of the dangers that he undergoes for her. Serena has only a hazy idea of what these dangers might be: she knows



nothing of the world outside London's pampered inner courts, and has no wish to know. The origins of her precious preparation, the franchised city of Singapore Three, seems as distant as the moon. Serena's world lies in the heart of London, wrapped like a pearl in its layers of fortifications against the broken lands beyond. This morning, however, she has been a little adventurous. The Thames has been

frozen for over a month now, and today Serena's friends took her skating. She remembers watching them as they swooped over the marbled ice like summer swallows, then flocked to the v-booths that lined the shore in search of more vicarious entertainments. Serena herself, too frail for such energetic pursuits, stayed in the coffee house on the Embankment, where she sipped hot chocolate laced with morphiates, and watched the skaters pass by.

The river is untroubled by commerce. This far into the winter, the ice-breakers are running down-river only as far as India wharf; merchanters trailing obediently in their



## NIGHTSIDE • LIZ WILLIAMS

broken wake. The contact from Singapore Three is arriving on one of these ships. Cassini has told Serena that he has arranged to meet the man in a warehouse off Peking Street — a go-down, Cassini calls it. Serena's friends have told her that this is a term used frequently in the Far East. This adds to Cassini's glamour, and makes Serena just a little more afraid of him: a sensation that she enjoys, as long as it doesn't become too threatening. She's ill, after all, and she tires easily. But whenever she gets bored, which is often, Serena tries to find out more about Cassini: obsessively tapping into the veins of the Web and running down the traces of his systems. Cassini, however, has been careful; she finds nothing. She wonders, fretting, whether he has reached the go-down yet, or whether he is still out in the London night. She wonders, too, whether he is thinking of her, and at that thought, she smiles.

"Serena?" a voice says.

Serena looks up and sees her mother standing in the doorway. Against the darkness of the hall, her mother seems almost young; her blonde hair coiled precariously about her head and her slight figure wrapped in a silk robe. But when she steps forward into the light, Serena can see the lines that a lifetime of getting her own way has etched onto her mother's face, and the determined set of her jaw. *I could look like her one day*, Serena thinks, and her own mouth tightens at the thought.

"Aren't you dressed yet?" her mother says, fussing. "Honestly, if I didn't know better, I'd think you didn't want to go. Has Premya put out your dress?"

"I don't know."

"Well, go and look," her mother says, and rings the bell for the maid. "You know Jamie Buchanan's going to be

there tonight, don't you?" Serena nods, and although she tries to hold it back, she starts to cough. Her mother's lips compress into a thin line, but as usual she avoids any mention of Serena's condition. "He'll hardly want to see you... less than your best," is all that her mother says, under her breath.

"He won't," Serena says, with icy precision.

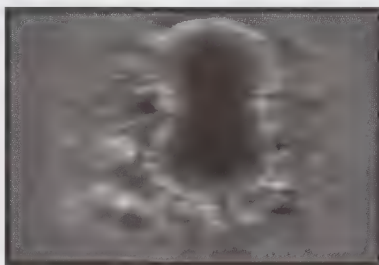
"Very well, then."

The masque is to be held somewhere behind the secret walls of Highgate: a fortress within a fortress. The theme of the masque is summer. Serena wears lace as golden as fire, velvet as soft as flesh in the sun. Just before she leaves, she takes the last precious drops of the preparation, and not a

moment too soon. Already, the silk of her handkerchief is mottled with haemorrhage as she steps through the door of her father's house to the hired car. The limousine is too hot, stifling with the smell of leather, but outside the temperature is dropping further beyond zero. When they arrive Serena, wrapped in furs, hastens to the mansion, but a chill still snatches her breath from her throat. Then she's through

the door and enveloped by warmth.

The room in which the masque is held is suffused with the perfume of roses. The blooms have the excessive quality that is characteristic of gen-enhanced organisms: the roses are too crimson, too sweet. Serena's sensitive faculties detect the faint undertone of opiated pheromones. She sighs, but the sudden taste of blood in her mouth bisects the pleasure. Delicately, she touches her handkerchief to her lips. Heads turn, then turn away. Serena moves slowly among the crowd, pretending not to notice their covert glances. They are staring at her because of her illness: the sickness which





presents with such discreet elegance in a few drops of blood and the translucence of her skin.

She strolls to the window, where she finds herself standing next to Juliet Arden. Juliet's family are wealthier than Serena's own. They have a place in the Shires, tucked away in a Cotswold fold behind gun turrets and shark-hounds. Juliet's people have their own transport, too; a rarity these days. Serena has always considered Juliet to be a little vulgar: old money, yet rather flashy with her robust good health, but as she looks at Juliet now she sees with a jolt of shock that Juliet, too, is betraying the signs of illness. There is a heightened glow to her skin, a sheen of sweat that has nothing to do with the hot-house warmth of the room.

"Juliet?" Serena says, and the girl replies, with a small smile, "It's nothing."

The message passes between them, unspoken. They share a secret, and Serena wonders how many people, here in this luxurious place, are hiding similar sicknesses. All sorts of things are rife in London these days: new manifestations of fevers and syndromes. Myalgic-encephalitis and the other pollution-borne viruses of the last century; older accompaniments like tuberculosis. At the thought, Serena coughs delicately, just once. In response to Juliet's concerned glance, she manages a smile and turns back to the panorama of the city. For a moment she almost envies Cassini. What must it be like, to be able to move freely about the world, unconstrained by illness?

Pleading fatigue, she goes to sit on a nearby divan, where she can watch the crowd and count the signs: secret traces on the landscapes of the flesh. Her reverie is interrupted by the arrival of another friend — well, perhaps not precisely a friend, but certainly an acquaintance. Serena has not seen this woman, Nola Elgin, for over a year. She never quite knows what to think of Nola, who is the only member of Serena's immediate social circle who travels: to Paris, Prague,

and to places whose names are only vaguely familiar to Serena. No one travels much these days, and certainly not for pleasure. Nola, however, even has a job: working for an aid agency which hosts charity events to generate relief for the stricken southern hemisphere. Serena sometimes goes to these events, but not often. They upset her too much, and besides, she is ill and cannot be expected to worry about the suffering of others. But she is a little nervous of Nola, who now sits down heavily beside her on the divan and gives her an unreadable smile.

"Well, hello," Nola says, wryly. "How are you? No, don't tell me — as well as can be expected, I suppose."

The last words are laced with sarcasm and Serena does not know quite what to say. She feels as though the rules of the game have been changed, somehow, and no one has told her. She gives a little nod. "I'm fine," she says, trying to sound brave.

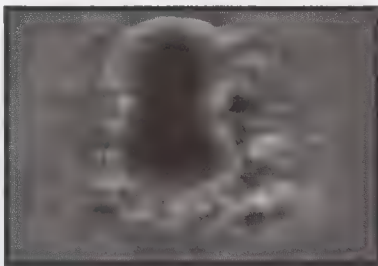
Nola says nothing, but stares down into the pale depths of her champagne with something that could almost be distaste. Serena notices that Nola's pale forehead is shiny with perspiration beneath the lacquered arch of her hair and the hand that holds her glass is shaking a little, almost imperceptibly, but Serena has

sharp eyes and has learned to recognise the signs.

"Nola? Are you all right?" Serena asks, still playing the game of illusion, expecting the customary evasions, but Nola says bluntly, "No. No, I'm not all right. I've got Sumari fever."

Serena blinks, appalled. Sumari is one of the new diseases; rare, but almost invariably fatal unless it's contracted in a particular configuration. She's read about it, of course, but never thought that she might meet someone who actually had it.

Bitterness wells up within Serena and she stumbles over the words: "How — I mean, if you don't mind me asking — how did you get it?"







Nola gives her a long level look and Serena's gaze drops away with unexpected embarrassment. At last Nola says, "It's not what you think, Serena."

Now, it's Serena's turn to stare. She thinks for a moment that someone must have opened the window, then realises that it's only her own face growing cold. Nola continues, "I caught it in Paris, from a Somalian refugee. There are so many new viruses these days — once one gets out of London, that is. Don't worry, Serena," and there's more than a touch of mockery in Nola's voice, "it's not contagious."

Serena says, desperate for conviction, "But there must be something they can do about it, isn't there? I mean — surely there's a cure?"

And Nola says simply, "No. No, there's no cure." She gazes around the room with an oddly complacent satisfaction, her gaze sliding from face to fevered face.

"But there must be," Serena says, desperately seeking reassurance, denying the truth all over again.

Then Nola's angry eyes meet her own and Nola says, very low, "You've no idea, have you, what illness really means? How lucky you are..." Nola's voice sharpens. "I promised myself I wasn't going to lecture anyone tonight. I wasn't even going to tell anyone what's wrong with me, and then I overheard you speaking to Juliet Arden. You're a wonderful pair, both of you. A brace of languishing consumptives, preoccupied with your own little world of cyber-shopping and gossip and parties that might just as well be virtual, for all the life that anyone ever shows. And the pretence, Serena, the pretence — all the careful discretion of your artificial, manufactured illnesses, each one of you feigning to be worse than the rest, all an excuse, so you can be so delicately glamorous, cared for and cherished, never needing to take any real decisions... Symptoms without cause and no damage except a little nervous adrenaline and a little harmless blood loss. Well, I must be the height of fashion,

mustn't I, because I'm really sick. And I'm really going to die." The room has fallen silent now, and everyone is staring in Nola's direction. "Go on, then," Nola says venomously to the room. "Go ahead and stare. I'll give you something to stare at," and she wrenches open a sleeve to display her ulcerated arm, lesions clustering across the ruined skin. "How chic does that make me, then?" She reaches out and presses a hot, moist hand against Serena's appalled face. "Merry Christmas, my dear. I doubt I'll be wishing you another one."

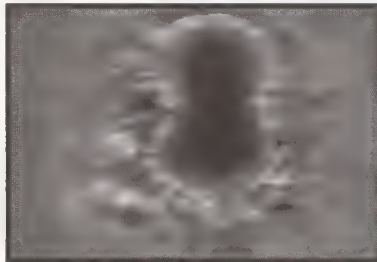
And then she rises and leaves. The crowd parts before her as she stalks through them like the leper she's become. Serena's chest hurts in earnest now; she realises she's been holding her breath.

Behind her, Juliet Arden's loud, over-bred voice says, "Well, really!" and the chatter of conversation gradually starts up again as the guests, with consummate skill, pretend that nothing has happened, and the party goes on. But Serena walks like an automaton to the window and throws it open to let a cold rush of air into the stuffy room, and leans out into the night so that she can breathe again. Then she turns away from the window, ignoring the stares, and slips out

of the room to where the car is waiting. Outside, she lingers for a moment, standing in the snow until it soaks through her expensive slippers, staring up at the distant stars.

When she gets back to the house, she finds that a package is waiting for her: Cassini's Christmas present, a parcel of artificial sickness. Carefully, Serena opens it and stares numbly at the row of little phials. In each resides a dose of fashionable symptoms, a barrier against the pain of living. Serena sits with the box on her knees, and then, one by one, she takes each phial and throws it into the fire.

Liz Williams has had stories published in *Interzone*, and we've already accepted another story for a future issue of TTA. Liz lives in Brighton.







## SIMON LOGAN

I've just received my second issue of TTA and thought it was about time I wrote to tell you how glad I am that it exists! I particularly appreciate the leeway you afford your contributors, allowing much flexibility on story length and content and not just publishing 'name' authors. I have to admit to a certain amount of frustration when I leaf through the latest *Best New Horror* or similar collection as it seems to be the same names over and over again. I often wonder just how convincing these 'best of' lists are when most of the contributors seem to be friends with the editor...

## ANDREW HEDGECOCK

The Michael Marshall Smith interview and the Polanski piece were excellent, but it was particularly good to come across Allen Ashley's denunciation of brand name culture. On the day my copy of TTA19 arrived my Head of Department suggested (without a trace of irony) that wearing badges with a team logo might persuade the University to offer us a funding extension. And Allen's reflection on the counter-subversion of the subversive — the pseudo-revolutionary posturing — that's become such a major trend in advertising is worthy of further exploration. Nice piece.

The additional reviews section sounds an excellent idea. In terms of your schedule: *Literary Review* may be monthly, but some of their reviews (even the extended features) cover books that have been around for a couple of months — and they don't seem stale to me.

## GARY COUZENS

Re the reviews idea: apart from books and videos, which have a long shelf-life, you can't hope to be current, or comprehensive, so it's best not to aim to be. Better to be selective instead. The standard lead-time for film previews is no more than 3–4 months before release, often shorter (unless you catch it at a festival). So, I'd suggest running reviews of 'appropriate' books, film, art, music etc (ie those you think the readers would be interested in) rather than trying to be comprehensive. By all means criticise something if it's no good or is disappointing, but don't bother reviewing media tie-ins, for example.

## NEIL WILLIAMSON

I think including reviews in TTA is a great idea. By the very lack of definition (or the broadness of it anyway) of what TTA is about, it is very easy to miss great books which float around in the mainstream etc.

## DAVID GULLEN

Liked the Michael Marshall Smith interview, which was in an enjoyable and informative style. There were some interesting thoughts in there, especially about Vietnam, but I can't agree that America didn't lose the Vietnam war — I think that's precisely the problem, although I'll accept perhaps it was a realisation that they couldn't win. This was something the French knew as far back as 1946 at the French Indochina war when General Leclerc said 'It would take 500,000 men to do it and even then it could not be done'. I think the problem for the USA is one of national guilt, because a super-power that has nailed its banner to the flagpole of freedom really shouldn't go round beating the living daylight out of former colonies trying to achieve independence, and personal betrayal, because the US government sent its men to do said beating and told them it was good.

## SARAH SINGLETON

A strong theme to TTA19 — the tainting of childhood — so it seemed to me. Without doubt, the first story was my favourite, Barry Fishler's 'Heartstrings'. A wonderful melancholy, understated atmosphere, very smoothly written. And the sense of something sinister about the magical violin player, a threat from the start, despite his talent. Though just how it finally unfolded — I still hadn't worked it out, despite the clues and the title. The last piece fell into place, and the picture was revealed. How could it have been anything else?

'Everybody Goes' by Michael Marshall Smith I also liked very much. The clear, sunny descriptions of the boys' games, the sense of living in the moment while the impending loss still hovered in the background. A poignant, but oddly satisfying ending.

And also 'A Breach of Tissue' by Jason Gould. It took a while for this one to work for me. Then disparate threads coming together. Incidents and remarks pointing to a bigger picture. It was brilliantly plotted, sympathetic and shocking at once. It struck me so much that as soon as I'd read it, I turned to the beginning and read it again. Something that occurred to me: although the narrator is a girl, it sounded like a boy. I kept trying to make it be a girl, but it didn't seem to work. Oddly, it didn't diminish the story. It worked just as well. Why should this be? I don't have any problem with men writing from a female perspective and vice versa. I'm not sure there's any profound difference between a male and female viewpoint. So what made 'her' sound like a 'him'?

## PETER KING

You ask for reactions to the idea of a reviews section. From my own point of view it sounds like a good idea, as long as it did not detract from the space available for stories, which are my own main attraction to the magazine. However, in order for such a section to work, I wonder whether it would be helpful for the magazine to feature some brief explanation each issue as to the history behind the term 'third alternative'. I certainly like the fiction you feature, and it clearly does fall into no specific genre/between genre. But third alternative to what? Or am I being too literalistic?

*[Originally we thought of genre fiction as the first alternative and non-genre fiction as the second, with TTA existing between — or rather beyond — them both. It is fairly ambiguous, so could Paul's idea be the perfect solution? What do other readers think?]*

## STEVE REDWOOD

Okay, I know I made you suffer with some of my stories, but why not simply forbid me to send any more, instead of persecuting me like this? First, you deprive me of TTA18 altogether, lead me into a false sense of security with an explanatory letter, then inflict a dance of the seven veils of me, removing only four veils, leaving me panting in frustration!



Fascinating though the interview with Alasdair Gray was (for me, *Lanark* was a mind-blower), for example, I would have preferred to have one Gray interview and one Marshall Smith interview, instead of *two* Gray interviews and *no* Marshall Smith interview. In short, pages 7–14 and 47–54 were missing while other pages were doubled up, because some careless IDIOT (not you), after all the care of the production, editing, design, weeding out of my stories, and everything else, couldn't be bothered to check the page numbers — the most elementary of all possible precautions. I hope this happened only to my copy, but this is unlikely, and you've probably already received a lot of irate letters and death-cum-torture threats, so I'll say no more.

I hope to see a front page picture of the culprit impaled on the railings outside Parliament, or wriggling on one of the Shrike's branches in Dan Simmons's *Hyperion*. No, really...

Re possible reviews in TTA: good idea, though maybe keeping away from 'pure' sf and fantasy, which is already well covered in other magazines. But of course, it's exactly those endless series of fantasy clones that publishers will send you... Another, more frightening, danger for you is that I've just finished a novel, and in a worst-case scenario...

#### PETER TENNANT

TTA19 was yet another excellent issue with fiction of the usual high standard. I especially liked the offerings from Michael Marshall Smith (and a cracking interview), Barry Fishler, Jason Gould and Sten Westgard. Great articles on Roman Polanski and Alasdair Gray.

Glad to see Peter Crowther writing a column for you, though I think he may be preaching to the converted this time around. Hey, I read Dana Gioia's 'The Gods of Winter' years ago. As for Weldon Kees...I read Dana Gioia years ago.

Hard to work up any strong feelings either way for The Dodo Has Landed. I share some of Allen's reservations about the siting of advertising hoardings (in parenthesis I wonder if he's ever read the Fredric Brown short story 'Pi in the Sky', in which the 468 brightest stars in the night sky are moved to spell out the slogan *Use Snively's Soap*). And I think label fetishism, as Allen calls it, is a bit daft and would never buy such products myself, but on the other hand I

respect the rights of those who choose to do so, just as I respect their right to watch football matches, listen to jazz music, eat shark fin soup and do all the 1001 other things I've absolutely no interest in doing myself. Live and let live. And finally (working backwards through TDHL) I can't really take seriously the idea that our cultural heritage is being endangered or my enjoyment of a piece of music compromised by a 90-second sampling in an advert for paper tissue. Sorry. As to why the artists themselves are allowing their music to be used in this way, financial incentives aside, I would have thought that was obvious. Publicity. Ladysmith Black Mambazo may very well 'dance like holy ancients and possess the voices of angels', but before the baked beans thing I'd never heard of them and neither had a lot of other people. That advert probably did a lot more for them than it did for baked beans. Another example. Years back Peugeot used some of Smetana's 'Ma Vlast' in one of their adverts. I don't know anyone who liked the music so much they bought the car, but a couple of people with no previous interest in classical music did ask me to lend them the CD. In parenthesis again, a quote, possibly misremembered or misattributed, from old Heavy Metal outfit The Mighty Groundhogs, 'We were ready to sell out our principles, but nobody wanted to buy'.

I think TTA Review is a good idea, certainly as regards books. Not so sure about film/theatre/TV reviews. Given the short shelf-life of such things and TTA's schedule it might be difficult to keep the reviews current. Video reviews seem more viable.

#### ROSANNE RABINOWITZ

I'm all for the idea of a review section. Though I've enjoyed the profile/interviews and their perspectives on 'a body of work', that could leave a lot out that doesn't fit into that format; for example, exceptional books by new writers.

TTA19 was a good read. Did it just happen to turn into a themed issue? It's back on track after 17 and 18, which I have to say left me cold (except for 'The Blue Posts' which was grand — I liked 'Prison Ships' and the zombie story weren't bad). Most of the stories in those issues were clever but lacking in the emotional resonance that first attracted me to TTA. Others tried too hard to be tough and hard-boiled. Back to the positives, my favourites in 19 were 'Heartstrings' and 'A Breach of Tissue' and 'Different Angels'. 'Heartstrings' especially, with its well-realised Brooklyn setting, down-to-earth details setting off the lyrical, poignant and fantastic elements.

#### CLIFFORD THURLOW

The *Kids* issue read like a small volume of short stories, each evoking an oblique nostalgia for something gone — for something that may never have been, a play in light and shadow like movie *noir*; how apt that Polanski was present at the feast. I didn't miss the sacrificed elements; TTA19 was a *tour de force*.

#### SARAH CRABTREE

In TTA19 I adored 'Heartstrings', Barry Fishler's alternative to the 'big slimy thing leaping out of the closet'. This kind of writing is more subtle, it flows deeper. We'd all run away from the slimy thing. What is harder to take in is when the slimy thing is disguised as something beautiful.

Like Michael Marshall Smith I like to mix my genres. He says 'both the market and readers are much more geared up for single-genre works'. True, but I think this pigeon-holing mentality is slowly disappearing. Categorising people equates to bigotry; rather like assuming romantic fiction is just for women and women writers. As time moves on, categorising, in line with gender, will become irrelevant.

#### PAUL LAVILLE

I'm dead pleased with most of the stories and features in the last few issues — intelligent, thought-provoking and very dark, though I would like a bit more humour (even David Lynch and JG Ballard are funny at times).

Pete Crowther's *Cornered* in TTA19 was excellent! My writers circle recently had a heated debate about whether or not a story ought to be 'sign-posted' by genre. I'm all for crossing boundaries in fiction. To be offended by, say, a 'sci-fi' story that's not clearly identified as such is bullshit I reckon. So I agree with Mr Crowther entirely. I read anything — from 19th century classics to modern and postmodern novels, *Dr Who* books, plays, sf and fantasy from Iain Banks, Ballard and Moorcock to fiction — and the result is that I know the written word is infinite, and in infinity there are no boundaries...



# STARLIGHT

TIM LEES







**“That man,” my Mother once remarked — meaning my Uncle Edward — “is a *plain embarrassment*.”**

But family was family, and he was one of us, no matter what he did; as a result, I think, his influence on me went more or less unnoticed for a good few years, at least until the damage had been well and truly done. By then (so I believe) there were quite real fears I might follow in my Uncle’s less than reputable footsteps.

But, alas! While I was every bit as profligate, I lacked even a spark of his extraordinary genius. My life, instead, has been a catalogue of small, prosaic failures: bad investments, foolish marriages, and countless ready opportunities passed over in the hope of something brighter, later on. Indeed, if I had any better way of making money, I’d hardly be here now, tapping my story on a borrowed typewriter. My bank accounts are gone, my rooms are bare, and, to risk a note of pathos here, it seems my childhood is the final thing of value left to sell.

These days, it strikes me as remarkable my parents even let me near my Uncle Edward, much less permitted all those long, indulgent holidays I actually spent with him. Both Mum and Dad were sticklers for propriety; true members of the British bourgeoisie, they took the values of their age and class and hugged them to their bosoms like the Word of God. Above all else, they dreaded seeming ‘common’ or ‘uncouth’ — just as they loathed those folk they felt had somehow ‘got above themselves’. The balance was precarious, and I, like any child, was destined to upset it every chance I got. A dropped ‘h’ or a grubby sleeve, a hint of schoolboy slang — these things were acts of treachery in a persistent but unstated version of the class war which, although I scarcely understood it, I accepted as a normal and inevitable part of life.

Each morning, as I left for school, my uniform would be inspected with a military rigour. Dad would don his spectacles, straighten my collar, probe my windsor knot with open scepticism. The best that I could hope for was a grudging nod. I cleaned my shoes so many times, I’m told I even made the motions in my sleep — unending little circles, finger tucked into a corner of the sheet. I’d often hear my Mother boast how much I valued cleanliness, how neat I was, and certainly, my nightly twitchings never worried her, the way they might a modern parent. They were signs of diligence, nothing more. Even my future would be spotless, all mapped out for me, pursuing Dad’s career in loss adjustment...

I still wonder, sometimes, how things might have gone if I’d agreed to all their plans. Would I have been happy? Rich? Successful? Who can tell?

At any rate, when I was eight or nine (as story tellers say), Fate lent a hand. Two events contrived to push me towards Uncle Edward: first, a series of debilitating asthma seizures, for which the doctor recommended country air; and second, very much more interesting, a number of ‘corruption’ cases in the local parks.

I listened eagerly for news of these, aware just from my parents’ tone of voice that there was something fascinating and mysterious involved; yet something I could never ask about. Even the dictionary — so enlightening on words like ‘penis’, ‘harlot’, ‘haemorrhoids’ — gave only the suggestions of ‘decay’ and ‘moral depredation’, shying from the details.

My parents were both much alarmed. The city wasn’t safe for somebody as young and as impressionable as I — especially through the long, unstructured weeks of holiday. They had my health to think of, too. I needed somewhere clean, secure — out in the country, say...

And naturally, it wasn’t Uncle Edward’s name that sprang to mind. But Edward’s wife was Kate, my mother’s sister;





and Aunt Kate, at least, was held to be reliable, dependable and sure.

So I was placed aboard a train at Paddington, to be collected, two or three hours later, like some noisy and enthusiastic parcel, at a little station in the West Country; from which time on, it seemed to me, all normal life came to an end. Indeed, in some ways, I might say I've spent my whole life waiting for it to resume.

My Uncle was a shortish, stocky man, bald since his twenties. In the time I knew him, he changed little; the hair he had went grey, his movements became stiffer, and in later years, he was inclined to peevishness and bouts of temper. Yet, at heart, he would remain the same indomitable and eccentric spirit who (he claimed) had roamed through China and Tibet, and been the friend of great African chiefs and medicine men... Well, I may have had my doubts about a few of Uncle's stories, but I never voiced them; I liked listening too much, and didn't care to spoil things, either for myself, or him!

His house was large, set on a hill in rather shambling grounds, just out of town. Approaching from the station, I'd watch eagerly to catch my first glimpse of its chimneys, poking up above the trees. Sometimes, the sight brought unexpected novelties: a giant radio mast, swaying in the wind; a copper-coloured gadget like a sextant gleaming on the gable-end; and once, a good half of the roof blown off, in one of Uncle's less well-judged experiments. He always had some kind of project on the go — more often, two or three. The bulk were innocent. A few, less so. I well recall his bid to film his dreams; his fascination with the power of clocks; the symphony he wrote by simply spattering the score with ink — each page, he claimed, the essence of a single microsecond, caught in time. (The town bandmaster, a severe and sombre Methodist, had other words for it, earning my Uncle's lifelong enmity.) The Dadaists would have been proud of him, for sure! But most of all, I think back to a single winter visit that I made. New Year, perhaps? Or later — say, a February half term? I had a brand new bike, and rode beside it in the guard's van all the way from London, reluctant to abandon it for even half a minute. How I dreamed of the adventures that I'd have, cycling the long and solitary miles round Uncle's home...

Yet this was not to be. A heavy snow had fallen, blanketing the countryside. I was allowed down town, but longer trips my Aunt considered dangerous, and she forbade them. Oh, I loved the snow — I built a snowman on the front lawn, right above the road — but equally, each day, I longed for it to disappear.

Then bit by bit, I learned about my Uncle's latest scheme, and felt content, just for a while, to leave my bike propped up in Aunt Kate's pantry, out of sight and — almost — out of mind.

I'd heard before how he believed the stars to be alive, great beings swimming through the depths of space as whales do through the sea; or else, perhaps, the fragments of a single, vaster entity, all scattered now — the relics of a great primordial God ("In which case," he remarked, "the basic nature of the Universe is one of loneliness, division, loss...").

He had a habit of expounding on such matters at the tea table, much to my Aunt's annoyance. But if she seemed put out, then he'd evoke the Great and Good in his defence: 'As Aristotle was at pains to show...'; 'It was Voltaire who first proposed...'. He was not, I think, particularly accurate in his citations from such folk; at any rate, it seemed they all agreed with him!

"The Universe is a gigantic living, breathing thing," he claimed, waving a half-eaten ham sandwich at us both. "Think of the implications, then. Consider them. For instance — if the stars are all alive, what then are we? What are the planets? What, I may ask, is this fine *sandwich jambon*?"

He took another bite, chewed thoughtfully, then fixed me with his eager, javelin gaze. "Faeces," he said at last. "We are no more — no less — than faeces from the stars."

"Edward!" My Aunt was genuinely shocked.

"A stellar dung..."

"Now that is *quite* enough!"

My Uncle put his head on one side, shrugged, but made no effort to apologise. "Just Science, dear. A little Science lesson for the boy..."

My Aunt indulged my Uncle's Science as another woman might have tolerated pigeon-fancying, or any similarly doubtful male pursuit. His Science was all well and good, kept in its proper place — by preference, as far away from her as possible.

But Uncle wasn't finished with me yet. After the meal, Aunt Kate busy in the kitchen, he tipped his head for me to



follow him. The living quarters of the house were all my Aunt's, and bore her hallmarks: cosy, comfortable, safe. The attic was my Uncle's realm. A fold-down stair connected them, so rickety, it took me all my nerve to climb; but then, as Dad would surely have agreed, nothing worthwhile in life was ever gained without a little mild discomfort.

And the attic — ah. The attic was another world.

The debris of my Uncle's past enthusiasms crowded it, the shelves piled high with rolled-up charts, coiled magnets, microscopes, bottles of tinted glass; and there, in one corner, the mounted skeleton of an appalling monster: a great biped with a long neck and a ball-shaped, needle-toothed, demanding head, almost on a level with my own... It would be years before I realised that the thing was fake, a fish's skull fixed to the neck of some poor flightless bird. Yet, as a child, I thought it the most terrifying creature I had ever seen.

This time, there was a new device. Clumsily balanced on a sawhorse, bolstered with a pile of bricks, I took it for a telescope — a big reflector, with the eyepiece at the side; but when I rushed across and peered into the lens, I saw no stars and planets — only blackness, void.

"Tsk — boy —"

He motioned me to sit. I stood before him, one foot treading on the other, while he filled his pipe; and then he talked to me, the way he always did, not as a child, but as a protege, a student, someone in this fickle world he felt that he could trust. He lit a match. I batted at the smoke, making it dance this way and that.

"And what," he asked, "do you suppose a *distillate* might be, eh?"

I shook my head. But rather than explain himself, he talked some more about the stars, tracing their relative positions with a finger on the table-top. He talked of brightness, spectral type, blue O-stars ("crotchety and proud"), cool M-stars ("slug-a-beds"), bright G-stars, yellow like the sun; he talked of supergiants, dwarfs and doubles, binaries bound up in turbulence by clouds of fiery gas ("No different in their way to Earthly marriage, I might suggest...").

"And if a star's alive —" smoke drifted from his lips — "is it alive like you and me? Or in a different way?"

"Like — no, different — no —"

"Does it have a brain? And kidneys? Does it have a spleen? Does it have...testicles?" He peered at me. I made a prune-face, trying not to laugh. "Which parts are living? All of it? Or only some?"

I shrugged. He spoke about the speed of light, the long, long journey of a single photon on its way to Earth. He quoted figures at me, strange names he said were Arabic, because the Arabs were the greatest of astronomers in history...

"And by the time the light comes down to us, it's so diffuse, it's almost nothing, hm? It's spread too thin. The thing you'd have to do — assuming that you wanted to — is *concentrate* it, yes?"

"..."

"Distil it, like a fine liqueur. That's what. Refine the...sheer *quintessence* of it. There's a word for you. Remember that."

He tapped his pipe, peered in the bowl, then put it in the pocket of his cardigan. He gestured me towards the telescope again.

The eyepiece made a cold ring on my skin. Behind me, Uncle switched the room lights off. I stared, but even so, I couldn't see.

"Go on, go on," he grunted. "Pay attention — and look harder!"

So I tried again. And realised, suddenly: this was no ordinary telescope, designed to look out at the stars; instead, through

some extraordinary web of lenses, prisms and what-have-you, it was meant to *draw the stars' light down to Earth*, to hold it and condense it, drop by drop. I stared into the blackness. It seemed as if I balanced on the lip of some great abyss then, till I could hardly tell if I were looking up or down, or else, indeed, if I'd already fallen and was tumbling through that empty, unlit void...

Till presently, I saw a light.

I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me at first. Only it came again, and stronger: silver, twinkling, slowly gaining magnitude. It seemed to swim out of the dark, and yet it wasn't constant, like a lamplight; there were moments when it winked out, flickered and dispersed, then slowly gathered itself up again. For moments it seemed shapeless, like a little phosphorescent worm or fish. But then, as it came closer, I began to make out limbs, a torso, and, at last — a head.

"But it's a man!" I cried.

"Not quite, my boy..."

Nevertheless, this was enough for me: here, in this tube, my Uncle had distilled a living being, a homunculus, an imp of starlight. I watched it, rolling in its inky medium. It pulled its legs in, hunched its shoulders, furlled itself into a small, fluorescent ball; then stretched, impatiently, its body twisting like elastic, thinner and thinner...

"Middle star, Orion's belt. Pretty fellow, eh? Taken a good few months to grow him that big. Don't know what I'll do if he gets bigger..."

"Is it alive?"

"Alive? Well, if you like. Bit of a question, really. Is it alive? Are we?" He put the main light back on. I blinked. He covered up the eyepiece with a little metal cap. "In case," he said. Then he was taking out his pipe, relighting it, and off onto another tack: the properties of magnets and their beneficial influence on human health. "Sadly neglected in the modern world," he said.

Over the next few days, the temperature went up. The snow turned into slush, and then to endless, dirty rivers running down the roadsides. Shod in wellingtons, I dragged my bike out from the pantry and sailed off, imagining myself some bold adventurer, set for a wild new land... The world itself had lost all its familiar summer shapes, grown stranger, less hospitable; the trees upon the river bank were stark and bare, the waters where I'd fished for minnows, scarcely months before, become a rushing, broad grey torrent. I lingered on the humpbacked bridge, watching the river surge beneath. A chill wind cut the air. Huge, glassy lakes spread in the fields, suggesting some weird, post-disaster world...

I cycled on. There was a cottage, so low down it seemed half sunk into the mud. A woman called me. She knew my name, the way that people do in small towns. She gave me milk and soggy biscuits.

"You'll be staying with young Katherine Bledsoe, then," she said, though it was odd to hear my Aunt described as 'young'.

"And Uncle Edward," I put in.

"Ah, well..." She gave a slight, unhappy shrug. "Young Katherine's quite a decent sort, mind you."

I had the good sense not to mention my less creditable relative again.

I thought that thunder woke me, trailing from the waking world into my dreams; but then I must have dozed once more, because the next I knew, someone was shaking me, and fiercely whispering my name. I smelt my Uncle's strong tobacco, and the faint, mushroomy odour of his cardigan.



"Don't talk, don't talk. Can you get dressed in the dark? Your warmest clothes!"

I hardly needed prompting about warm clothes. Mine were folded neatly on the chair, as Mum always insisted. Quickly, I pulled them on. My Uncle waited by the door. And then together, blind as bats, we crept downstairs. I knew about the fourth stair, with its tricky, high-pitched squeak, and the sixth stair, which creaked even louder; I stepped over them. But Uncle, clumsy in the way that adults are, blundered sublimely onto both.

There was a single, frozen moment. Then my Aunt's voice cawed out: "Ed-waaard!"

He stopped, and cleared his throat, then in a pallid imitation of his normal tone, stammered: "One m-minute, dear. Just going for a drink of water..."

To me, he breathed, "We'll need your bike. Be quick!"

I felt my way along the hall, into the pantry. Aunt Kate was quizzing him. I heard my name. I lugged the bike into the hall. My Uncle shoved the front door and a shock of icy air caught at my face. My Aunt's voice echoed in a ghostly wail: "You *cannot* take the boy outside at this hour — "

Then we were racing down the front drive, both of us. I leapt onto my bike. My Uncle wrenched the gate open, we plunged through; and yet something had gone wrong, somehow. All round us, there was deep, pitch darkness, an opacity of night...

The street lights had gone out.

My Uncle hesitated, peering right and left. He sniffed the air, and then he pointed. "This way," he cried — in tones that I could never disobey.

"What's happening? What's up?"

"This way!"

My Uncle cut a wild, outlandish figure, out there in the dark. He seemed to wear a cloak like a magician, though I realised soon enough it was his wool-len dressing gown, thrown on over a cardigan and baggy pants. He still wore slippers — scarcely practical for such a damp, cold night. They flip-flopped as he walked. Sometimes he slithered on the icy ground, and leaned on me for safety. But there was no time to go home and change. He made that very clear.

"Go, boy, go! And tell me what you see!"

He thumped my shoulder. "What?" I said.

"Go on!"

I was his scout. I rushed ahead, down to the corner and then back again.

"Yes? Yes?" he wheezed.

"Nothing," I told him. "No one there. Lights out — "

"We're on its trail then! Come along!"

Gasping for breath, he told his story. There'd been an accident, he said, a dreadful accident (although he never told me how it happened); his telescope, his great condensing tube, had toppled from its moorings, crashed down on the floor, and cracked from end to end. Such shoddy workmanship! Such poor materials! (And surely not my Uncle's fault, when all was said and done?) Suddenly freed, the imp had jumped up like a genie from a bottle. Uncle grabbed for it. It slithered from his grasp; it squeezed between his fingers just like soap, and ran off dancing round the room. He swatted at it, knocking books and bottles flying, but the creature merely skipped away. It even seemed to laugh — to put its gleaming hands upon its hips and rock with mirth. Then suddenly it flew into the air, fastened to the light bulb and

embraced it like a baby at its mother's breast. The workshop vanished into darkness. Uncle stumbled, barked his shins. Only the imp shone, brilliant as ever, though it cast no light; rather, said my Uncle, it *enclosed* the light, hogging it greedily. And then, before he'd had the chance to recollect himself, it tumbled from its perch, bounced off the floor and struck the window, where — instead of stopping — it merely strained a moment, then pushed its way straight through the glass, without leaving a scratch.

My Uncle, trying to recall his wits, began to fiddle with the light switch, frantically; but every particle of light had vanished from the house. He had to wait until the moonlight poured in and refilled it, like a murky pool, before he managed to negotiate the steps and find his way down to my room. "I do believe," he said, "I do believe it's *feeding* on the light!"

We raced round town like mad things for the next few hours. Often, he'd send me skittering up side-roads, cycling off on crazy errands, trying to anticipate the creature's path. I saw no sign of it. The sky was luminous with stars, a million tiny points, spilling their living rays upon the Earth; while all around, the world was black and cold, the merest cinder, floating in a void...

My temples ached. My legs were tired. The air seemed to pulsate around my head, throbbing like a beaten drum, *boom, boom, boom...*

At last, completely out of breath, I stopped beside the market square. I wished that I was back in bed. Our great adventure had begun to pall on me. I moaned under my breath...

And then I saw something.

A faint, uncertain glimmering, up near the Post Office... The lights of High Street made a string of baubles stretching up the hill; baubles, which, even as I watched them, flickered, dimmed, and then — like toppling dominos — went out.

I spun the bike around and pedalled back to Uncle, fast as I could go. I found him leaning on a bollard at the top of Richmond Street, apparently exhausted. He stared up at the sky, muttering, as if in pain: "Oh, Betelguse. Oh Albemuth. Antares, star of Scorpio..."

"Uncle — "

His voice had a peculiar, singsong lilt, an incantation, maybe, and his eyes were almost shut. "Castor, you great menage of broken parts..."

"Uncle. I saw the lights go out!"

"Rigel and... Hm?"

"The lights," I gasped, waving my arms.

His plan was simple, outlined in a moment: I would cycle round, using the side streets, come up from behind the creature, frighten it, and drive it straight into his grasp. While he — well, what would he do, then? I asked.

"Oh. Ah." He shrugged, lifting his hands. "I'll think of something, I suppose..."

He didn't sound particularly self-assured.

I cycled off. One of my pants legs had been soaked from riding through a puddle; my naked fingers now felt frozen to the handlebars. My wheels began to slide and slither under me.

And for the first time, then, I felt afraid.

The air was soundless. Nothing moved. Blind windows stared at me; the houses here were dark and empty-seeming, and I couldn't match them with the jolly daytime buildings that I knew stood in their place.





I came out on the High Street just as planned, swung round and headed for the Post Office. I might have been the last person on Earth. I looked for Uncle, but he wasn't there. The moon had gone, thick shadows clung to everything... Then suddenly — a blinding light.

Man-shaped, and moving. Moving *towards me*!

Yet the perspectives were all wrong. The creature seemed much closer than it should have been, so close it almost filled my vision. Or else —

My eyes adjusted, just like shifting gears while cycling.

This was no tiny sprite, no harmless little imp such as I'd seen back in the workroom. Now it towered over me; its head was on a level with the first floor windows, and it seemed to waft and ripple, like a flame; strange trceries, as intricate as veins, ran up and down its body in a rush of fire. Its form would oscillate and flicker till my eyes began to ache. I blinked, I shook my head... Where was Uncle Edward? The old familiar street had been transformed into a roaring channel, a great mouth that seemed to suck me in, compelling me towards that remnant of a star, that freak of life engendered in my Uncle's attic rooms.

And I remembered his instructions, but I think I only followed them from sheer paralysis of will. I gripped the handlebars, steadied myself — then pedalled full tilt for the thing, ringing my bell like Billy-O and shouting at the full stretch of my lungs!

I expected — even then — expected it to flee.

Instead — *it came straight at me!*

The next few moments were a jumble. I felt as if a whirlwind caught me up. A long, thin arm of light reached out; it seemed to stretch and stretch. A blueish glow swept through the world; then everything was upside down, the rooftops swirled, I saw the telegraph wires, the flash of a reflection in an upstairs room — I landed, *thwack* —

My first thought was for my bike. Had it been damaged? Was it safe? I picked myself up, awkwardly. The bike lay on its side, six feet away. Across the street, I saw my Uncle, crouching on the ground, wrestling with a dense, dark mass. His body pressed on it, he seemed to wrap himself around it, grunting with the strain. Then, struggling still, he gathered up the whole thing in his arms and hugged it to his chest.

He grinned at me. I realised what he'd done — he'd caught the creature in his dressing gown. The heavy, dark material was practically impermeable to light. It was a wonderful, *ad hoc* solution, and it made him look so proud, I thought his cheeks would burst from smiling.

I was wet and dirty and my knee was grazed; but the bike was quite undamaged, and so I grinned, too. We headed home in a delightful haze of self-congratulation. My Uncle clutched the bundle tight. Sometimes it seemed to heave and jump against his chest, so that he gasped a little with the effort and clung tighter.

"Is it heavy?" I enquired.

"Oh no." He sputtered, like a schoolboy giggling in a class.

"Oh no, no. I'd say — it's very *light*..."

We both laughed, perhaps a touch hysterically. He told me of his epic struggles: "It was after you — it didn't see me hiding in the doorway — and I leapt out, *yah!* Spun my dressing gown up high, a trick I learnt out in Malaysia, hunting for flying foxes, and —"

But he was overconfident. Or maybe he'd forgotten how the footpaths were, that chill, damp night. One minute, he was right beside me; next, he'd gone. I looked around and saw him, flat on his back, arms waving helplessly; the gown unfolded great black wings and from its midst a silver dart shot high into the air, hung for a moment, then, spinning on

its axis like a corkscrew, whisked itself into the sky away from him.

I stood, my head back, watching it grow smaller, smaller, dwindling till I couldn't find it anywhere among the great star fields that arched over our heads.

**We were both punished, Edward and myself.**

I was confined to bed next day. Aunt Kate was sure I'd catch a chill. She railed about the terrible condition of my clothes; she threatened to inform my mother, a threat which, luckily, she never carried out.

As for my Uncle: there are subtle punishments in marriage. Then, they were unknown to me; today, all too familiar. Relations at the dinner table cooled to freezing point. He tried to please her, poured her tea, inquired after her every whim; she made it clear, however, she had little time for him. He disappeared into the potting shed for long hours with his pipe. He couldn't face his lab, he said; his best experiment was ruined. To have achieved so much, then lost it all...

It was more than any man should have to bear.

A mood of deep dejection settled on him for the remnant of my stay. While Auntie Kate, in time, forgave us both, nothing could shift the gloom from Edward's soul. One day, not long before I left, I found him sitting on the front step with his pipe in hand, surveying the considerable view, down into town and off towards the distant hills. It was a bright day, almost springlike, and the sky was dusted by a featherweight of cloud, sketching its patterns on the blue. But Uncle Edward only stared with sick and joyless incapacity. His shoulders slumped. His free hand hung between his thighs like loose, dead meat.

He looked out at the world, and then I heard him speak, more to himself than me. "Star-shit," he said distinctly. "Nothing else. That's all we are. Just star-shit..."

I was amazed; embarrassed; yet delighted, too! I'd never heard a grown-up swear before, excepting barrow boys and other common sorts my family had little business with. I had assumed it was a childhood vice, confined to school, with its great wealth of secret languages and codes. I was astonished at my Uncle's clear familiarity with our vocabulary — though, to be sure, he'd used it in his own, uniquely Edward-ish capacity.

At that point, I confess, my admiration for him knew no bounds.

Tim Lees once spent a fruitful summer bottling lizards in a museum. He is currently organising a major international conference for media and education folk. His mother works with someone who knows Nicholas Royle's mother — which just goes to show how incestuous this slipstream business really is.

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**Most people don't plan their lives except in retrospect.**

Walter 'The Woodpecker' Wilson hadn't hit his head against a brick wall in over five years, when a man came seeking him, sweet-talking him, offering him more money just for competing than he could cram into six empty carrier bags, if he would only come out of retirement and just bang that old head one more time.

I was that sweet-talking stranger. I was calling myself Barnabas in those days.

As a small boy I always wanted to devote my life to studying something very small but infinite. It could have been an ant farm or it could have been lichen or it could have been any number of things. But by the time I returned home, after many years and many lifetimes spent abroad, I knew what it was.

Here in London, amid the scorched masonry and the mud and the Honeycomb Hostels and the people hurrying by and the people left behind, there exists a thing.

Those who do it and those who watch it and those who make money out of it call it headbanging. Those who don't do it or watch it or make money out of it don't call it anything at all because they hardly know it exists, or if they do know, they don't believe it, or if they do believe it they don't much care.

Talking to Walter once, early on, I made the mistake of describing it as a sport. Walter doesn't get angry — angry men lack longevity in his world — but he can get annoyed, same as any living human. He was annoyed then.

His voice is light but it carries. Like tobacco smoke. "Head-banging isn't a *sport*," he said.

"Okay," I said. "So what is it?"

"It's something you do," he said.

There are some men who are tappers, who start off tapping their heads against the wall, tap-tap-tap, and gradually build up. Why rush to meet pain and damage, they'll say. It'll come soon enough, it'll come without you calling.

It's a point of view.

But Walter is a woodpecker: the original woodpecker. Bang-bang-bang, every note striking the same, right from the first one to the last, seeming like he could go on forever if needs be, monotone and unmoved and magnificent.

Just get on with it, that's his motto.

My girlfriend — the woman who at that time, though not for much longer, called herself my girlfriend because I didn't try hard enough to prevent her doing so — asked me once if I didn't think headbanging was a cruel thing, and I thought about that quite seriously for quite a while and then I said, "Yes it is cruel, but you see, honey, it isn't cruel to me." And I gave her a big smile, all teeth and meaning.

And still Walter was reluctant.

We met in a pub by the dried up docks, a pub too near its death to act as rough as it looked.

(We couldn't meet at my place, because my place right then was a suitcase, and we couldn't meet in Walter's pod, one of thousands of pods hexagonally stacked, accessed by covered ladders, because the pods were not designed for entertaining. They were clean, they were dry, they were kept at a comfortably constant temperature, and they afforded just enough room for a man of medium height to stand up and for a man of almost any height, any known human height, to lie down. They were built for sleeping in, not living in, and once you got a pod it was yours for life. No matter what you did,



no matter what happened, no power on Earth had the authority to remove you from your tenancy. Walter told me all this, more than once, though he wasn't what you'd call a talking man in a general way.)

He was reluctant because he was retired.

Not that Walter had been forced to retire, like so many others, through brain damage, exhaustion, injury, or the fossilising fear which brave men think they leave behind in adolescence, but which so often returns refreshed from its rest, to shock and disappoint and shame, in late middle age.

Walter had retired because he could. Simple as that. And it was the proudest accomplishment of his life. He wasn't given his pod, he bought it, with some money and with three month's labour as a podmaker. From headbanging, he still had enough money to get him through a spartan but never quite perilous retirement.

His mother and father had both worked hard all their lives, almost every day of their lives, and they had never won this prize. They had belonged to the first generation in this country in a century which in old age could not both retire and eat but had to choose one over the other.

I came home, I freely admit, in obedience to nothing more than a superstitious dread of passing from one thousand years into another — of spending that indistinguishable and unforgettable moment — anywhere than in the place of my birth.

Right at the end, I think what Walter gave me was a lesson in anticlimax: its inevitability and even its desirability.

Two men bang their heads against a brick wall, until one of them has to stop. The one who doesn't have to stop, obviously,



for a thousand years



mat coward

is declared the winner. This is headbanging.

When I was a boy and liked to gamble, especially against rich youths who had money to spare and no judgement, I sometimes watched, and bet on, banging bouts that went on for six, seven hours. The winner only has to live longer than the loser in order to win his purse and for those who bet on him to win theirs. Nothing in the rules says how much longer he has to live. Just *longer* is enough.

“Because you’re the one, that’s what I’ve been told.”

“I’m not the fastest.”

“I know that.”

“I’m not the hardest.”

“Nope.” The tall stranger smiled a light smile of victorious concession.

Walter nodded, a nod designed to look as if he were considering. “There’s people won more prizes than me.”

“You’re not the winningest, Walter. Didn’t say you were.”

“I’m not the fanciest.”

Now the man who called himself Barnabas shook his head and shifted in his chair; calling an end to this recital of nots. “No, Walter, you’re none of those things. But you *went on* longer than anyone else. More taps, more bouts, more years. By every available measurement, Walter, you are the enduringest headbanger there ever was. That’s what I’ve been told.”

“That’s what you heard.” Walter smiled like a shy boy.

Barnabas spread his hands. “Sir: that is what I have been told.”

Walter ran a finger around the rim of his brandy glass, and then massaged that finger into the sweetspot on his forehead. Because a habit cultivated over many years is not broken by anything as latter-day as retirement.

He looked at the younger man and said, “You’ve not been told lies. I surely was, I surely am, the *enduringest* headbanger that has ever lived or has ever died.”

Now Barnabas smiled for real. “Good,” he said. “Because that’s what I’ve been told.”

Walter didn’t mind my company. Perhaps you might even have said he enjoyed it, if you’d known him well enough to make such a judgement. Though how you would get to know him that well, I can’t imagine. I think you’d have had to be him, and even then I’m not sure he’d tell you everything.

A square-bodied man, with a good, hard head. Nicotine-coloured curls, and a cropped grey beard. The face, of course, bashed and scored and red beneath the skin. But not a frightening face: the walls had been good to him in this respect as in others, leaving him with the look of a worker, not a puppet; of someone who did more than was done to him.

A still man. No fidgets or starts or blinks. Still, strong, polite. He listened, you spoke, then he decided; if that wasn’t the story of Walter’s life, then it was at least what Walter believed to be the story of his life.

A man with no weaknesses because at some earlier stage of his life he had gone hunting them and found them and clubbed them to death — or anyway had scared them so badly they hadn’t dared show their faces since.

I think he didn’t mind my company because I bought him more drinks than he could afford, and because he was not by nature an especially reclusive man, and above all because, for all my made-up ways and my rigorously self-educated talk, Walter saw me as a harmless waster, dreamer, loser, drifter. I hope he was wrong about that, though I won’t pretend it’s a thought that has never occurred to me.

He was better at silences than I was. Not surprising: I made my living convincing people; Walter had made his living by not dying. So every now and then, as we sat in that cosily rotting pub, I would feel the need to speak. And when I did, Walter would smile at me. *You lost*, the smile said. *But don’t worry about it — I’m retired now.*

“What are your plans for the thirty-first, Walter?” I asked, during one of these quiets. “Or for the first? Going anywhere, doing anything, having a high old time?”

He shrugged, his movement as slow as a moonwalker’s.

“Come on, Walter,” I insisted. “This isn’t just any old New Year’s Eve. You can’t go to bed early this year. You have to do something!”

“I’ve done all the somethings I ever intend to do,” he said.

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “You’re retired. I forgot.”

“What do you want?” he said.

This was our sixth meeting, and the first time he’d asked that question in any form. Until then, he had been content simply to sit there, drinking brandy I paid for, occasionally massaging it into his sweetspot — his only unconscious habit other than breathing, I believe — listening, and looking at me. Waiting for me to say what I wanted to say, or not say it.

In a way, therefore, I felt that his asking this question at last was my first big breakthrough. Although, of course, it could just as easily be the end.

It was about then that I was looking at him and he looked so still and strong and it was warm in there and I wanted to say to him, “Look, forget the money. Forget the network, forget headbanging. How would you like to be my father?”

I didn’t, because I knew that whatever Walter might or might not be able to forget, I could never forget the money. I was born that way. I am a rich man trapped in the life of a poor man. I’ve known this since I’ve been old enough to



know anything. Now, you've heard of men born in women's bodies, or women born in men's? They can get gender re-assignment — see, all I need is class reassignment, no surgery required.

I couldn't forget the money, so I answered his question. "What I want, Walter, is I want to put headbanging on the network. There is something about it which... I believe it can make us a lot of money. Headbanging: this seductively pointless activity; spectacle stripped down to its essentials." I was rehearsing my speech to my network contacts.

"What is headbanging," said Walter, "that you should want to show it to the whole world?"

"Okay," I replied, and continued with my speech. "It is a sport which — "

"Headbanging isn't a *sport*," he said.

"Okay," I said. "So what is it?"

"It's something you do," he said.

"I don't know if it's a drug," I said, "or some gene thing, or what. But the word is it's the real thing, and they're ready to go with it."

"It's bad," Walter said, more animated by this news than by any of my talk of money and networks and come-backs. And I could almost see his point, though it wasn't something I really gave a damn about one way or the other.

What it came down to was that *they* had come up with something — a drug or some gene thing or whatever — which safely removed from humans the need to sleep, thus massively increasing productivity and profitability. The process, of course, would be voluntary, in accordance with the law. But in practice, who'd hire a man who needs sleep, when 24-hour workers are readily available?

To me, it sounded like a win-win: the company gets more profit, the consumer gets more product and the employee gets more wages. But Walter, with that thing he had about retirement, I suppose I could almost see his point.

I don't know why he changed his mind. Didn't know then, and I'm not entirely sure I know now. I was on the verge of giving up on him. I'd spent a lot of time and not a little money trying to persuade the Woodpecker out of retirement, and I didn't seem to be getting anywhere, so I was just about ready to split, try something else, somewhere else.

I'd stay to see in the Thousand, I decided: I'd stayed this long, I might as well do that. And my girlfriend had family here, so it would be a good place, a good time, to lose her.

I met Walter at the same pub, one more time, to say goodbye. I was thinking I'd miss him, and that this must be what people used to mean by friendship, when he took a sip of brandy, rubbed a drop of it into that legendary sweetspot of his, and said, "I'll do it."

I didn't much care why. I just said okay and got on with doing the thing I do, making the arrangements.

Walter's opponent was to be a banger thirty years younger and about a third heavier, who had never lost a bout in all his three-year career. His name was Unemployed Smith, and the story was that his parents, non-Anglophone immigrants, chose that name from a photo caption in a newspaper.

It was set to be, in as much as headbanging could be said to have such things, a classic bout. Going out live on the eve of the Thousand, an epic contest between old-and-wise and young-and-hungry.

If it went as well as there was no reason to think it wouldn't, then...then I was pretty sure it was going to be the start of a comet with a money-tail. Walter would be free to drink brandy

all day every day, with Unemployed Smith matching him round for round if he so desired. And I would be moving out of my suitcase, and into a mansion. Or a bungalow, anyway, to begin with.

Walter wouldn't rehearse, or train, or spar. He met Smith once, had a drink with him, and said that was fine.

I spent the final few days with Walter, even though we had no real business to conduct, because I thought I might tell him that he had become my friend. I didn't quite get round to that, but I got near to it, I think, when I said to him, just before we went on, that I was really pleased and grateful that he had decided to come out of retirement.

"I'm not coming out of retirement," he replied. "Not now, or ever. I am retired."

I didn't laugh, because I could tell he was serious. "Okay," I said. "So what's this?"

"This is just something I'm going to do," he said. Which was fine with me. What you call things doesn't matter, I thought.

I had a picture in my head of how the bout would go.

Some men start off tapping, I knew, but not Walter 'The Woodpecker' Wilson, and I saw in my mind Walter walking steadily up to that wall, taking a deep long suck of air into his lungs, calmly staring at the brickwork, waiting for the whistle.

Waiting for the whistle, looking into the bricks, looking through the bricks, into the wall. The whistle goes, and Walter starts right in on the wall, bang-bang-bang, every note striking the same, right from the first one to the last, seeming like he could go on forever if needs be, monotone and unmoved and magnificent.

Just get on with it, that's his motto.

And meanwhile, a few yards to his left, there's Unemployed Smith, full of juice and fire, his taps so much less fluent than Walter's, less rhythmical, jerky almost; sometimes harder, sometimes softer. The sweat flying, the blood coming, the eyes of a nation flicking from one to the other, from the blood to the sweat, from the older man to the younger, not quite believing what they see, not really accepting that two men can do this, can keep on doing it, can bang and bang and bang until finally one of them has to stop.

And then, waiting for the whistle that night, I had another vision of how it would go.

I remembered Walter saying, "I'm not coming out of retirement. Not now, or ever. I am retired."

And in my head I saw him waiting for the whistle, waiting for the signal, with a little smile on his still face. The whistle goes, and Walter takes in a deep long suck of air into his lungs, and he turns from the wall, and he walks calmly over to the sponsor and *bang*, he drives his sweetspot right into that rich man's face and he smiles and says "That's for putting up the money" and he turns again and walks over to the network executive and *bang* the head goes in again and he says "That's for putting on the show" and it's obvious to all that the man is dead before he hits the floor and just before Walter turns again he finds the camera and he looks right into it and he smiles.

Walter walks up to me and he brings his head back and *bang* he says "That's for not knowing who your friends are".

And then the whistle really did go, and I saw neither vision, not the dream nor the nightmare.

I saw two men, Walter Wilson and Unemployed Smith, take in deep long sucks of air into their lungs, and I saw



them kiss the wall — only word I can use, really, kiss — with their respective sweetspots, and I saw them stand back from the brickwork, smiling, not looking at each other, and kiss the wall again. And again and again, and on and on.

Some people might have thought they were just warming up, I suppose, people who didn't know headbanging or headbangers, but I didn't think that. I knew there was going to be nothing more, no blood no sweat, and I left the studio, I got out as quietly as I could as quickly as I could.

It was adjudged, by those with the authority to adjudge such things, to be not only a commercial and televisual flop, but also something approaching an incitement to disaffection, aiding and abetting disproductivity. Absenteeism was high the next day, nationwide — high, that is, even given the date. I was lucky to get out of the country with my liberty intact. It will be a long time, if ever, before I am able to safely set foot in London again.

I don't know why he changed his mind, and I don't why he did what he did. He did tell me he was retired, that's true, and perhaps I should have listened to him. Perhaps I should even have heard him. A fine date certainly for a lesson in the inevitability and even the desirability of anticlimax; as one Thousand becomes another. Couldn't fault his timing, no one ever could.

I was forever producing unfruitful conversational openings with Walter, even allowing for him not being a conversational man. About the stupidest attempt I ever made at getting to know him was when I asked him once how he'd got started at headbanging.

I was imagining, like, a travelling fair sets up in a small country town and the harvest stops for a day as all the red-cheeked folk gather round to inhale that rarest scent, the perfume of excitement, of something different, of something that doesn't grow in the soil. And a barker stands alongside a wall, some kind of mobile wall, and he taunts all the red-

cheeks, which one of them has it in him to bang that wall, which one of them has a secret sweetspot and is willing to put it up against the champ? The lads all look at each other and the men all look away and then up steps one boy — I don't know, the blacksmith's boy or something — and up he steps and...

It wasn't like that, of course, I never even imagined it was. There were no red-cheeks, there was no soil, I've never seen a travelling fair or spoken to anyone who has. That's not how things start, except in retrospect.

Even so, Walter's reply was a small one. He could have given me more, I think, if he'd wanted to, which he clearly never did.

"I always banged my head," he said. "I didn't always get money for it, but then I did, and now I'm retired."

I've never banged my head except by accident. I've certainly never banged it against a wall. It's just something you do, I suppose, unless it isn't.

I won't get my retirement, anyway, not for a long time, not at this rate. I won't win reassignment to my proper station, or if I ever do it won't be here, and it won't be soon, and it won't be any thanks to Walter 'The Woodpecker' Wilson.

Even so, at the airport, no luggage, next available flight, looking at his face on a newspaper, below the fold, I hear myself say to him, "Thanks, Walter." And I can't believe what I'm saying, but I mean it so hard my teeth bleed.

On the first day of the new Thousand, I hear myself say to him, "Literally, Walter: thanks for nothing," and I mean it so hard my teeth bleed, though I can hardly believe what I'm saying.

Mat Coward's stories have recently appeared on the modern, steam-driven, string-type internet at [www.gothic.net](http://www.gothic.net) and [www.bluemurder.com](http://www.bluemurder.com). Another is due in the June 1999 issue of *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*. He is gardening correspondent of the *Morning Star*, and does not own a squirrel.



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# Solomon Brothers Inc

## James Harris



**Jerry digs while I hold the light. He's the strong one, see,** like De Niro in *The Deer Hunter*. I could do it but it would take longer and we might get caught. And Jerry can't go back inside again 'cause he says it would kill him. So I hold the light and stand here but I get jumpy on account of all these graves under foot. I can't help it, I keep feeling cold fingers on my neck and I just have to turn around. Then Jerry yells at me 'cause I took the light off him.

Jerry is my brother. Not really but we tell people. He says it's good for business, and he is the brains of the business I'm not ashamed to say. We are purveyors of memorabilia. Or perverters of memorabilia as Jerry likes to say. Together we are the Solomon Brothers – Nostalgic Memorabilia. It's not our real names but you know how it is. It's like when an actor changes his name to make it sound more famous. Jerry and Allen Solomon.

"When do we meet the Chinaman, Jerry?"

"He's Japanese, Al. How many times I gotta tell you he's Japanese?"

"Oh, yeah, sorry, Jerry."

"Don't worry 'bout it, Al. Now hold the light."

Jerry's from New York City, I think, or Indiana. We met in Rothworth medium security prison in Ohio. He was in for a string of robberies but he says he was really a political prisoner on account of nobody wants to give jobs to veterans and what choice do they have but to turn to crime just to scrape a living. The system won't let him work unless he's building birdhouses in the Rothworth workshop. The system don't like guys like us, he says.

But he's got this great tattoo on his arm, Jerry does, from his time in Asia. Two naked women kissing, all twinned up with each other. Sometimes he lets me look at it for awhile. It's just purple zags and loops when you're up close to it but when you back up a little you start to see them. Sometimes I want to kiss the women 'cause they're beautiful all twinned up like that but when I lean in they dissolve into zags and loops. Jerry calls them Kira and Kara. He says they were the best little whores in Saigon.

"You want a fig bar, Jerry?"

"You want me to get caught, Al? Is that it?"

"No, Jerry. I'm gonna have a fig bar and I thought — "

"I'm diggin', Al. How am I gonna have a fig bar?"

"Yeah, I guess."

Jerry gets ticked at me sometimes on account of he says I'm a little slow. I guess he's right but I don't really feel slow. It's just sometimes people talk too fast. You know how it is sometimes, when you're talking to somebody and you're listening to what they're saying and thinking of something to say yourself, and they start getting excited and talking all fast, like clacking jackhammers, and it just starts to sound like another language almost and by the time you figure out what they just said they sit there looking at you like you're a mullet head. It's just rude, but try and tell people.

Jerry knows I don't like people calling me stupid. He used to stick up for me in Rothworth. He was like Clint Eastwood in *Escape From Alcatraz*. He was the guy that looked out for you if you needed looking out for. Not that I can't look out for myself, I mean, that's the whole reason I was in Rothworth to start with. The system don't like it when you hit a guy with a shovel for calling you stupid. But Jerry looked out for me and taught me a lot about people. The best thing he taught me was how the less you say, the smarter people will think you are. Man, is that true. Just the other night at The Swallow

this girl was trying to talk to me and I didn't say a thing. She walked away thinking I was a genius.

Anyhow that's where me and Jerry met, four years ago. That's where we became the Solomon Brothers – Nostalgic Memorabilia. See, Jerry had this friend from the Army who lived in San Francisco and sold old baseball cards and autographed stuff from famous sports people. This guy told Jerry it was crazy how much money people would shell out to have a baseball signed by Sammy Sosa. And he's Costa Rican or something. Hundreds and hundreds of dollars for a baseball with some famous Costa Rican scribble on it. Then Jerry read in the paper where some ritzy place in New York had auctioned off dresses and clothes and stuff that movie stars had worn. They made a killing. Jerry laughed like crazy. He said some people have more dollars than sense. Anyhow that's how it started. We figured all we needed was some stuff from famous people and we were set.

Cemeteries are the worst because of the smell. Once when I was real little I had a cat that died. And I was all broken up about it and was crying and all to my dad when he came home. He took the cat up by the tail and tried to flush it down the toilet. I tried to tell him that it was only goldfish you were supposed to flush but he clipped me on the head with his bottle and told me to shut up. He did stuff like that when he was drunk. Anyhow, I was dizzy and fell asleep there on the floor where I fell. That was when he ran off. I woke up the next morning and my hair was all tacky with blood and I looked in the toilet and the cat was still there. I didn't want to touch it or nothing so I just closed the door and took to peeing and pooping outside until one of the neighbours saw me and called the police. But it's that same smell in cemeteries as when the police came and opened that bathroom door. A dead wet cat floating in your toilet.

"You want me to dig awhile, Jerry?"

"No, Al, I'm okay. You just hold that light nice and still."

"How much money is the Chinaman going to give us, Jerry?"

"Chinaman, Al?"

"I mean Japanese. How much is the Japanese man going to give us?"

"He's going to give us plenty, Al. But we won't get none of it if you don't let me finish."

"Sorry, Jerry."

Jerry and me can't help but laugh when we think of the kind of people that buy this stuff. They make us sick. Their lives are as empty as the locust skins you find on the sides of trees in the summer time. Least that's what Jerry says. All I know is that it's big money. And if we get enough, Jerry and me are going to the Caribbean. Jerry says there's always room for a few old pirates in the Caribbean.

Anyhow, when we first started we were dealing only in knock-offs, as Jerry called them. We would buy a jersey from a sport shop, one with the number of a famous athlete. Then Jerry would sign it like he was the athlete, copying the signature and everything. Then we would take out an advertisement in the paper. You'd be surprised how many calls we got. Then Jerry would work a deal with some guy over the phone and we would drive out to the guy's house. I would go to the door with the jersey and collect the money. If the guy started asking me questions I wouldn't say a word. That way he knew he was dealing with a real razor blade. Forty dollars for the jersey, twenty for the advertisement. We charged the guy two hundred dollars.

But you could only do that for so long until people started to get wise. After a while the newspaper wouldn't let you



place any more ads on account of people were complaining about being ripped off. So we moved around a bit. Los Angeles, San Diego, Pittsburgh. It was going all right until some guy in Dallas caught on to us and broke Jerry's nose in a parking lot. So that's when we started to get creative.

I'm not the type that brags and all but Jerry says we really are pioneers in our field. We were the first ones to knock over Planet Hollywood. Jerry had the idea 'cause the way they got all that movie stuff hanging on the walls. The leather jacket worn by the Terminator, Rocky Balboa's boxing trunks. And all that stuff already signed and everything, and all completely legit. It was pretty easy too, if you picked your time right. Just as they wanted to lock up on a weeknight and all, when not much was happening. Jerry said the managers at those places don't make enough money so that they want to try and stop you or anything. They see the gun and their hands go straight up. We were making a tour of all the Planet Hollywoods in the United States but then some big TV news station did a story on the robberies. Next thing you know Planet Hollywoods all over the world were getting robbed. Jerry says you know you're on to something big when everybody starts to copy it.

"Light, Allen!"

"Sorry, Jerry. I thought I heard something behind me."

"The sooner we finish the sooner we get outta here."

"Alright, Jerry."

"So just settle down and hold the light."

"I will, Jerry."

"And toss me one of them fig bars."

Like I said, Jerry is the brains of the business. It didn't take long for him to earn us a reputation in the field. Jerry says whenever there is a demand for something that is hard to get by normal means it creates what's called a black market. When people want the personal stuff of famous people they can't just walk up to the famous person and ask for it. They have to go to a collector. And where do the collectors get this stuff? Well some they get for themselves by regular means, but for speciality items they come to Solomon Brothers – Nostalgic Memorabilia. Like say you wanted the loafers James Dean wore in *Rebel Without a Cause*, or the watch that Milton Berle was buried in. This is the kind of thing we do. And Jerry says the market is enormous, worldwide even. We sold George Burns's cigar clip to a German man for two thousand dollars. An Englishman bought Marilyn Monroe's white subway dress for twenty-one thousand or so.

Jerry says the key to any business is knowing what the people want. The thing is, what the people want is always changing. I guess it's like when I was thirteen and I liked Maria Velario. I used to walk past her house with a stick in my hand and I would run this stick along the chain link fence that surrounded her yard because I like the sound it makes. And sometimes Maria would sit on her porch and kind of talk to me about things. She always looked sort of bored and sad on account of her Ma and her Dad were always screaming at each other. It was pretty bad too, and sometimes we had to talk extra loud so we could hear each other. And then one day she said she wished she had a puppy that she could look after and hold when she was feeling bad. I guess I liked her a lot 'cause I went over to the Martin's place where I knew they had a dog and all, a German Shepherd, and I walked right in their yard and unhooked his leash and carried him back to Maria's house. I don't see what all the fuss is about dogs on account of they don't like to be held much at all, and they got really sharp teeth. He bit my nose and chin, so I had

to sort of flop him upside down, and then he bit my knees and thigh. So I had to squeeze him real tight, squeeze until he stopped moving and his tongue hung out, just to make him stop biting, which he finally did as I was walking up to Maria's. And I guess I must have been bleeding or something because all I remember is she started screaming. She screamed so loud her Ma and her Dad stopped fighting and came out. And all I remember is them all standing on the porch and their mouths hanging low and Maria wailing like an air raid siren. She didn't want the damn dog at all.

But Jerry's got a gift, see. He knows all about people and can tell you exactly what they will want next. He says the memorabilia business is really a futures market. He says the idea is to acquire today the things that people will feel nostalgic about tomorrow. Sometimes you can even create nostalgia. Jerry says I can't talk about some of the things we done on account of it would make people feel bad. But I guess I could say this, that sometimes when people die young, at the height of their fame, then it makes them even more famous. People want to have little pieces of them to hold up and say, oh look, how sad, such a nice person and all. Only sometimes famous people aren't in any hurry to die so they need to be helped along. That's how you can create nostalgia. Like what happened with that fashion designer, and that TV star, and that English princess. Jerry says in a way it makes us architects of history in a media glutton world. I don't know, but I like the sound of it.

"That's it! I hit something. Get the bag ready."

"I got it, Jerry."

"Light, Al. Don't forget the light. I can't see shit without it."

"Sorry, Jerry. Sorry, sorry, sorry."

"This is a good one, Al. This'll be a big one."

"Yeah."

"That Jap's gonna pay a fortune."

"Yeah, yeah."

"And you and me are gonna spend two weeks in Bangkok."

"Where's Bangkok, Jerry?"

"It's far away from here is where it is."

"Is there room for a few old pirates in Bangkok?"

"Oh, yes, brother Al. I think there just might be."

It don't feel funny at all carrying a bag with a head in it. It's like any other bag you sling over your shoulder. It bumps against your back as you walk and sometimes you think you can feel a nose or an ear but you just try to think of it as a melon or a squash, or some giant potato with the face of Sonny Bono carved on it.

At the car Jerry pops the trunk and puts the bag under a blanket. The trunk is full with baseball stuff we got from our trip to St Louis. Knock-offs, all of it, but pretty good ones. We couldn't sell them in St Louis on account of we're wanted there by the police. The system don't like it when you beat a boy with a wrench 'cause he's got Mark McGuire's sixty-first homerun baseball that you came all the way to St Louis to get.

As we close the trunk there is a light on us. And a policeman is stepping toward the car. He is a silhouette against the headlights. I think about the shovel in the trunk under the blanket. I look around for something to hit him with but Jerry grabs my arm. He does that when he wants me to calm down. There's a smile on Jerry's face like a jack-o-lantern. It makes me smile too.

"Can we help you officer?"



"What are you doing up here?"  
 "Nothing."  
 "What's all the dirt from?"  
 "I slipped, fell."  
 "How many times?"  
 Jerry laughs.  
 I laugh.  
 "Can you open the trunk please?"

Jerry pops the trunk and I am looking at the back of the cop's neck. I wonder if I should grab it and squeeze. A neck is not a hard thing to squeeze, even the thick ones. But Jerry is talking to the cop, easy talk, like they're buddies and Jerry is telling him we are collectors and he is telling him we are the Solomon Brothers Inc – Nostalgic Memorabilia. And the cop is poking around in the trunk with his big flashlight and I bet I could take it from him and Jerry is easy-talking and he sounds like he's having a regular time of it and the cop is lifting things and pushing things around and he lifts the blanket and there is the bag, the bag, the bag and Jerry reaches into the box with all of our knock-offs in it and pulls out a baseball and the cop grabs Jerry's hand real fast and I should grab him, I should hit him, but he stops when he sees the baseball and he takes it from Jerry's hand.

The cop is looking at the baseball and turning it in his hand and he runs his gloved finger over the writing on the ball and he smiles big as bigness.

"Is that Mark McGuire's autograph?"  
 "It sure is. That's what I'm saying. That's what we do."  
 "So what are you stomping around near a graveyard in the middle of the night for?"  
 "Truth is I lost my watch in there today. My Uncle Tim's in there. We saw him earlier, my brother here and me. It's something my father wanted us to do. But we need to hit the road tonight, so I snuck in to try and find it before we left."  
 "You want me to believe you broke into a graveyard in the middle of the night to find a watch?"  
 "It's the truth."  
 "How do I know this is really Mark McGuire's autograph?"  
 "It's the same one as on that jersey there, check it."  
 "Sure looks the same, don't it?"  
 "All our stuff is guaranteed genuine."  
 "Solomon Brothers, you say."  
 "Nostalgic Memorabilia."  
 "We had a call. Someone poking around the cemetery with a light."

"Officer, I am sorry if we caused any concern. If we can somehow make it up to you for all the trouble then just let us know, we'd be glad to do it."

"No, don't worry, I think you boys are alright. Especially if you leave town immediately. Of course, I'll have to hang on to this."

The cop turns with the ball still in his hand. He looks at the ball in the light, thumbing the signature. He tosses it up and catches it then turns toward the trunk again. He takes the jersey from the box and holds it to his nose and sniffs deeply. He slings the jersey over his shoulder and starts back to his car. Y'all have a good night, he says and drives away.

Jerry is still for a long time with his eyes closed. I listen to him breathe, long and deep. Long and deep, over and over. Then he laughs. He laughs and smacks my back. He is laughing so hard that I can't help it but laugh and now I'm laughing hard and my ribs sting with it. We bend and hold our stomachs like men with belly wounds. We are crazy with

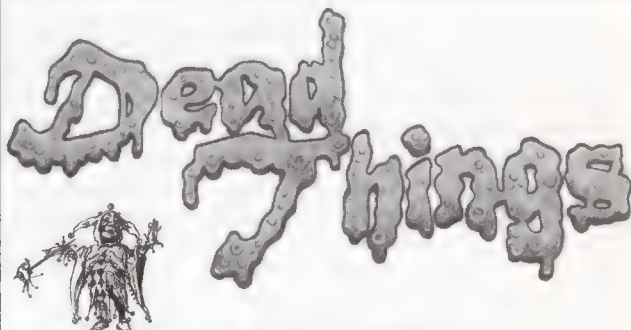
laughter, a couple of laughing jacks in the middle of the night, somewhere in America. And we climb in the car as the laughter starts to die and Jerry starts the engine and backs into a spot to turn around. He is feeling like himself again.

Yes, we are the luckiest bastards in the business, Jerry says. And he rolls down his window and pushes his face into the wind. Somewhere there is a Chinaman waiting. I'd like to meet him on account of I never met a Chinaman before. Jerry tells me they bow instead of shaking hands, I'll bet that's something to see. Jerry says we maybe can go and see Kira and Kara if things work out okay. Man, I would like that.

Jerry says it's a crazy old world. It's like that movie, *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad Mad World*. Jerry says it's a goldfish bowl atop a table, stacked on a chair atop a ladder, balanced on the shoulders of a skeleton walking a tightrope. The system, that is. The people need stuff to help them remember a time when they felt safe. And as for fame you can have it, it hardly seems worth the trouble. Except that you get to eat in really nice restaurants.

I just like being part of something on account of I never had nothing to be part of in my life. I have a place in the world thanks to all those empty people out there. It's like our business card says, we are the Solomon Brothers – Nostalgic Memorabilia. Purveyors of rare and unusual celebrity artefacts. Seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, working for all your nostalgic needs. Please allow four to six weeks for delivery.

James Harris is an American ex-pat now living in Cambridge. Originally from Washington DC, he moved to the UK in 1995 (because he couldn't take another minute of the OJ Simpson trial). He is a student of Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia in Norwich.




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## BOOKS

### TIMEQUAKE

**Kurt Vonnegut**

Vintage pb, 219pp, £5.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant

In the year 2001 the world is struck by a cosmic phenomenon known as a timequake, rather like the stylus jumping a groove on a gramophone record (those big black things we used to make do with before CDs came along). Time skips back to 1991 and the intervening ten years begin to repeat themselves, the same events occurring over again in exactly the same order as they did the first time. As a result free will is suspended, leaving people as little more than automata of flesh and blood, doomed to repeat whatever they did before, but fully aware of what is happening. And then, when 2001 comes around again and time snaps back into the groove, after ten years on autopilot they must rediscover the habit of thinking for themselves.

Such is the staggering concept behind *Timequake*, Vonnegut's first novel in over a decade and a book that sees him back at the top of his form. While Vonnegut might eschew the label science fiction, or any label for that matter, his best work is informed by that elusive quality 'sense of wonder' prized so highly by devotees of the genre. The difference is that for Vonnegut wonder has little or nothing to do with scientific theory and cosmic phenomena, but everything to do with outwardly ordinary people, and it is in creating such people and showing them as truly remarkable that this writer excels. The timequake is simply a facilitating device, important only in that it permits Vonnegut to discuss the things that most concern him in his twilight years.

There's the sense of a man in a hurry about this book, a writer who wants to get everything down on paper before it's too late. As with many of Vonnegut's other books, most famously in *Slaughterhouse 5*, fact and fiction merge to create a patchwork that is neither one thing nor the other. The author uses whatever material is at hand. We get anecdotes from his own life, moving portraits of the people he loves, family and friends, his views about writing, religion, science and so much else besides, all of it expressed with wit and compassion. We also get the final chapters in the life of Vonnegut's sometime alter-ego Kilgore Trout, the world's most prolific and least successful writer of sf, together with some fine examples of the quirky stories that are his stock in trade.

Reading *Timequake* is like sitting down to a long, open ended conversation with

an old friend we haven't seen in a while, someone who is a little bit wiser than we are but has the good sense and common decency not to rub our noses in the fact. Recommended without reservation.

### THE EXTREMES

**Christopher Priest**

Simon & Schuster hb, 393pp, £16.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant

Conceived and written against a backdrop of shootings in Hungerford and Dunblane, Priest's ambitious new novel touches on such topical concerns as the packaging of violent crime for entertainment purposes and the way in which constant exposure to violence can lead to a deadening of the sensibilities.

British born Teresa Simons, an FBI agent on leave of absence after the violent death of her husband, returns to England. She is drawn to Bulverton, a rundown resort on the south coast, the scene of a spree-killing with many details similar to the shooting in Texas that took the life of Andy Simons. Teresa investigates the crime as an oblique way of approaching and dealing with her own grief, making the discovery that on the day of the massacre Bulverton killer Gerry Grove visited the local ExEx facility, ExEx being a form of virtual reality that lets people experience extreme situations, mostly violent and/or sexual in nature. In the States Teresa has trained using ExEx as a way of learning to handle violent situations, but she has never fully appreciated its commercial uses. Also in Bulverton are representatives of GunHo, a firm making an ExEx simulation of the Bulverton massacre, and their overriding concern is to maintain the integrity of eyewitness memories of what happened. Teresa's enquiries are undermining their work and GunHo want her out of the way. As she doggedly soldiers on, drawn ever deeper into the ExEx world, Teresa sees the first glimmering of a way to make things right again.

This is a book of two parts. For the first two thirds *The Extremes* is a compelling read, with superbly drawn characters and a beautifully paced plot. In ExEx Priest has hit on a fascinating premise, a novel variation on the currently in vogue concept of virtual reality, and he uses it to telling effect, exploring such things as the nature of memory and the way in which our memory of an event can interact with and possibly alter its reality.

Then it all turns pear shaped. Teresa's virtual reality adventures become increasingly far fetched, with ExEx going from a clearly delineated scientific principle with rules to an anything goes wish fulfilment device, this shift explained in language not

so different from the technobabble Priest derided earlier in the book. Plausibility is lost as fact and fantasy merge. We get no fresh insight into the spree-killings or any of the other concerns touched on in the novel. Having asked difficult questions the book opts for an easy answer, with Teresa's headlong flight through a series of linked fantasy worlds to the one, inevitable scenario that will provide a happy ending.

*The Extremes* is worth reading, as is any novel by Priest, but after promising so much it disappoints, and the impression left in the mind is of a writer who painted himself into a corner.

### LUMINOUS

**Greg Egan**

Millennium hb, 295pp, £16.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant

Science fiction has always prided itself on its sense of wonder, but the criteria have changed. In the good old days (Before Hawking) mile long battlewagons hurled death rays at each other across the black immensity of space, and the manifest destiny of the feisty little bipeds from planet Earth was to conquer the universe, no matter how many alien carapaces we had to crack in the process. Nowadays the aliens are possibly of more concern to the ufology subculture, while understanding the universe, and as a first step understanding ourselves, has come to replace the idea of conquest as a mission statement, with bright, shiny scientific theories of life, the universe and everything providing the essential golly, gosh, wow factor. As a character states in a Greg Egan story, 'I'm here for the physics'.

Australian Egan is at the cutting edge of today's hard sf, a writer whose dexterity at juggling the principles of quantum physics and nanotechnology is undoubted, and whose wilder theoretical flights of fancy can be daunting to even the most seasoned genre reader. Put bluntly (and certainly not meant as a criticism), Egan is a writer who forces you to think and to think hard. His books are not the sort you take to the beach for a little light reading while you soak up the rays. But he is a writer who rewards the effort, who opens up whole new and fascinating realms of possibility. The nature of reality, the malleability of human nature, the existence of free will are concerns central to his fiction and the ten stories, initially published in *Interzone* and *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* between 1993 and 1998, that make up this collection reflect such preoccupations.

As with the old time sf the stories sometimes suffer for lack of any human dimension, or rather the human dimension can seem like a clumsy narrative device tacked on to a piece of scientific hoopla, something the writer regards as a necessary evil. An example of this is the title story, 'Luminous', the name of a giant computer used in a battle for control of reality between two rival systems of mathematics, but before



we can get to grips with this fascinating idea there are some sub-James Bond espionage games to be gone through, a kind of divertissement for the benefit of those who can't take the hard stuff neat. Similarly in 'The Planck Dive' you get the impression that Egan is championing at the bit to discuss the physics of a black hole and begrudges the effort of constructing a story around the concept. One character, a travelling bard of sorts who has come to record what is taking place for posterity, is shot down for falsifying the hard evidence in an attempt to create an archetypal narrative. Moral: we should all be there for the physics.

The best stories are those in which the human element is paramount, so neatly interwoven with the science as to be inextricable and, while individual stories might not always hit the mark, Egan is probably better than anyone at exploring the impact of radical new technology. 'Cocoon', which looks at the social, ethical and emotional implications of a scientific development that could eradicate homosexuality, neatly leading the reader to question his own attitudes, is Egan at his best and a gripping demonstration of the genre's potential. 'Reasons to be Cheerful' presents the case of a man who, in the wake of a childhood illness, can never experience pleasure or happiness, then cleverly turns it around to query the validity of all emotion. Belief, or rather the existential need to believe while recognising that all certainty is built on shifting sand, is a subject Egan returns to again and again. 'Chaff' sees a man exposed to a drug that gives him the opportunity to become the person he really wants to be, but compelled to affirm his existing personality. In 'Silver Fire' a doctor following the path of a ferocious new illness stumbles across a counter culture that elevates ascientific values, and is thus forced to reconsider her own adherence to the idea of a thoroughly rational, materialistic world.

Recommended to those who enjoy intelligent, thought provoking sf.

#### ONE OF US

**Michael Marshall Smith**

HarperCollins pb, 307pp, £6.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant

Michael Marshall Smith has a reputation for blending genres and his latest novel comes with the blurb 'The thriller has just evolved', but as regards subject matter is not so different from the kind of science fiction Philip K Dick, among others, used to write. Where Smith's book stands out from the work of his predecessors is in the way in which it's written, the borderline noir prose that he uses, the wealth of comic invention and depth of characterisation that he brings to the work.

Hap Thompson, the hero of *One of Us*, is the atypical Smith protagonist, a flawed character, bent out of shape by circum-



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#### I AM LEGEND

**Richard Matheson**

Millennium pb, 160pp, £6.99

Robert Neville is the last living man on Earth – but he is not alone. Every other man, woman and child on the planet has become a vampire, and they are hungry for Neville's blood. By day he is a hunter, stalking the undead through the ruins of civilisation. By night, he barricades himself in his home and prays for the dawn...

*I Am Legend* was first published in 1954 and was Richard Matheson's first sf/horror novel, establishing his reputation as one of the world's key genre writers (his second novel was *The Incredible Shrinking Man*).



#### THE FOREVER WAR

**Joe Haldeman**

Millennium pb, 254pp, £6.99

Private William Mandella is a reluctant hero in an interstellar war against an unknowable and unconquerable alien enemy, but his greatest test comes when he returns home. Relativity means that for every few months' tour of duty centuries have passed on Earth, isolating the combatants ever more from the world for whose future they are fighting.

First published in 1974, *The Forever War* won both the Hugo and Nebula Awards for Best Novel and cemented Joe Haldeman's reputation as one of sf's major writers. His experiences in Vietnam, where he won a Purple Heart, clearly influenced much of his writing.



stance and unlucky in love, someone who hovers on the periphery of the underworld but knows the difference between right and wrong, is at bottom a decent sort. He's made mistakes in the past and has powerful enemies, but also loyal friends, the kind of people who are useful to know when the chips are down, including an ex but still amiable wife who doubles as a ninja assassin.

Hap also has a special talent: the ability to have other people's dreams for them, so that busy executives needn't suffer the inconvenience of nightmare induced sleep deprivation. REMtemping is borderline legal and pays well, but Hap isn't satisfied and branches out into the highly illegal, and therefore much more profitable, sideline of memory storage. Unfortunately he makes a bad judgement call and ends up carrying the memory of how a high profile murder was committed, thus putting his own life in peril. Hap's employer wants him dead and a policeman with a grudge wants to lock him up and throw away the key, while men in black are seizing his friends, shooting up anyone and everything that gets in their way. Hap's only hope of getting out from under is to find his client and give her back the memory. But of course it isn't going to be that simple. Fortunately God is on his side.

On the face of it there's a lot here that doesn't bear too close an examination and some of the plot devices, such as the talking household appliances that dog Hap's every step and the identity of the unstoppable

men in black, would seem silly if taken out of context. Yet such is the fluidity and verve of Smith's writing, the appeal of the ideas and inventions he tosses off with Dickian panache, the depths of genuine emotion he touches on, you can forgive him much. Hap Thompson is a character with whom it's easy to identify and care about, a bargain basement everyman in search of redemption. Add to that an intriguing story, full of sudden twists and turns, packed with incident and engaging moments of light relief, written in a cynical, world weary tone of voice. The result is an entertaining and highly readable novel from a writer who, if not quite the breaking the mould kind of talent his publishers would have you believe, has the creative edge on most of his contemporaries.

#### WORD MADE FLESH

**Jack O'Connell**

No Exit pb, £10

reviewed by Michael Marshall Smith

I'm a great believer in novels which push the conventional genre boundaries. The sad fact is that it's not often done very well, and that 2 + 2 often adds up to a great deal less than 4. *Word Made Flesh* by Jack O'Connell is a powerful exception: not only has he taken a dark melange of satire, future noir and literary fiction and put them through the 'chop fine, then mix together slowly' setting of a food – or word – processor, but he's done it done very, very well.

The story revolves around Gilrein, an ex-cop turned cab driver in a worn-out



New England factory town, and his fractured quest to uncover the truth about the violent death of his wife. O'Connell's vision involves no mere gangland hit, but a patchwork of characters and events – including an atrocity in an Eastern European city – which gradually come to assume a twisted iconic status. At once a detective story and a profound probing of the underpinnings of myth, obsession and language, *Word Made Flesh* is lyric and funny, obscure and lucid, and a journey both backwards and forwards in time.

It's so rare to find such a triumph of style and content: a world of such dark, repellent beauty, teetering on the edge of nightmare, yet shot with rays of curdled sunlight. As its damaged protagonists slug their way out of the back streets of language, a whole new voice is born. Assured, compelling and satisfying.

### THE GROUND BENEATH HER FEET

Salman Rushdie

Jonathan Cape hb, 575pp, £18

reviewed by Steven Dennett

Something about our zeitgeist means that big, intelligent novels are ridiculed. They're read by weirdoes – chalky fellows with elbow pads and bad jumpers. Not surprising then that *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* has caused certain young arts correspondents (hello *Evening Standard*) to launch into the 'I'm thick, me, pass the lager' routine – and write not about the novel, but about avoiding it. What are they paid for, exactly? Rushdie, it seems, is fair game both for ayatollahs and cynical hacks who've forgotten how to read (but can do soundbites at the drop of a fatwa). So listen: this book is only difficult if you think all that silly language stuff gets in the way of a damn good yarn. This is rolling thunder, but with words.

The plot is mythic, re-telling the Orpheus story with Indian citizens of the world. (Orpheus lost his girlfriend, and had to go to Hell to find her. Plus, he had music in his soul.) It's about love, loss, pop and lonely superstars. Its gags are many, but laced always with demotic, polyglot prose that hugs like a many-threaded, warm, scratchy blanket.

In the Rushdie version, it's Ormus Cama who has to find his girl again. Ormus, born in pre-independence India, lives in the terrible shadow of his dead twin brother. He hears the songs of the future – 'Heart-break Hotel', 'Yesterday' – before they've been written, and begins to sing. Is the dead brother feeding the songs through to him? Ormus falls in love with sexy Vina Apsara, but has a habit of losing track of her. Eventually these two superstars get it together to form the greatest pop group ever known. Exiled from India they become celebrities: spangly Angels of History. And then the earthquakes start...

Rushdie's narrator is the photographer Umeed. His name means hope, and he loves both Vina and Ormus through the

## INDRA SINHA ON THE CYBERGYPSIES

### THE CYBERGYPSIES

Indra Sinha

Scribner original pb, 400pp, £9.99

This is the first true cyber-travel book and the first to locate the strange anarchic worlds of the online mavericks who display a curious combination of brilliance and delinquency. It is the personal confession of 'Bear', an advertising writer with a wife, children and a rambling house in the English countryside, who sacrifices just about everything for his nightly dose of cyber-reality, in which he encounters the cybergypsies: virus writers, hackers, witches, sex-peddlers, conmen, net vamps, randy paratroopers posing as girls... As Bear's real and imaginary lives fuse in a series of bizarre adventures, his writing work leads him into campaigning on the net for Kurdish refugees and the gas victims of Bhopal. Their tragedies become woven into the dark dream his life has become, building up to a personal and moral crisis. As the net closes in on him, Bear invites his wife on a trip to Ireland, during which he will confess all, in a last desperate attempt to save his marriage.

Indra Sinha recounts with startling honesty how he nearly lost everything because of his obsession with the net, and how the net can be as dangerous and destructive as any drug addiction. This is an intensely personal, genuinely fascinating example of narrative non-fiction at its most compelling.

#### How do you explain the addictive quality of online activity?

It ravishes the imagination. It conjures into being realities as 'real' as real life, albeit harder to pin down. Your experiences in cyberspace are as real as your everyday experience, just of a different kind. You have a new life, an *extra* life if you will. You are experiencing the huge, creative power of the imagination. It's like a highly addictive drug, because it stimulates the imagination to highly pleasurable visions.

#### So you were cybergypsies, explorers, and now the net is full of 'cybertourists'. How have the gypsies adapted?

The old gypsies, numerically, are swamped by the new breed of net users, but they are still around. Nearly all of them are finding things to do via the internet. Many still run old-style bulletin boards. Some have retreated into obscure corners.

#### Do you think that readers need a working knowledge of computers to get the most out of your book?

No. I have no interest in computers myself and I would hate anyone to think this book is somehow 'about computers' or 'about the net'. It is about people, and how they used their imaginations. It is about the collisions of cyberreality and the real world. About the ruined city of Shades and the ruins of Halabja. About death in the Vortex, or in Bhopal. It's about the power of the imagination to create worlds, and about the consequences of its failure in the real world.

#### What do you think when you read fictitious passages about computers by writers who have experience of nothing more advanced than a word-processor?

I am tired of hearing people say that printed books and newspapers are dead because 'soon you will be able to get information about anything from the internet at the touch of a button'. Such statements can only be made by people who've never spent hours searching the web in vain for some elementary piece of information.

#### There is a big difference between the virtual sex favoured by Lilith and the porn that seems to pass for online sex these days. Are you, as you seem, slightly wistful about this shift?

I was never into online sex, always found the idea too silly and embarrassing – witness my feeble performance when seduced by Lilith. If you read the *Cyber Sutra*, the sort of loving favoured by the best roleplayers was not a crude simulation of sex, it was very finely done, like an Anaïs Nin story.

#### How do you see the future of the net panning out?

Within a couple of years, it will be like television. But something that the big spenders, the corporations, the huge advertisers don't realise is that on the net there is no such thing as a target audience. Exactly the opposite. Conventional advertising buys opportunities to intrude into people's lives. On the net, people choose where to go. Why should they visit your site? You will have to give them something to make it worth their while and it won't be mindless adspeak. The net will kill conventional advertising within five years and good riddance.

#### Are you working on a second book at the moment?

My new book has the working title of *Curry Yarns*. Like *Cybergypsies*, it's based on real events, but told in a novelistic way. It's set mostly in India and is an investigation of two murders, one a famous society murder of 1959 and the other from about 100 years ago.



some unpublished sections of *The Cybergypsies* can be found at [www.cybergypsies.com](http://www.cybergypsies.com)



good times and the bad – mainly, though, through the earth-moving, fissuring break-up of contemporary culture. He follows the two homeless, semi-detached identities as the tectonic plates of truth shift and slide, grate, and crack up.

It's an alternative history novel, too: in this world Elvis isn't called Elvis, Lee Harvey Oswald's gun jams, and Zapruder coshes that bloke on the grassy knoll with his cine camera. Thus, amongst plenty of other little revisions, Kennedy lives. Rushdie's fantasy-land isn't making any particular point about how things could've been; it's really about a right to make things up, to imagine your way through a world already created by strange, teeming untruths. The ground beneath your feet? You have to make it yourself.

This is a book to wallow in and to quote. Rushdie bursts into stunning eloquence at so many points, launching essayistic broadsides at both old-style and new-style normalizers. He's shooting apparently from the authorial hip, rather than authentic character-narrator; Umeed, for a pro photographer, is oddly in love with words. Which means that this is not a book for you if you're irritated by linguistic exuberance, and demand your stories fast and your sentences short. Otherwise, it is yours: a serious, delirious attempt to find the positives – the means of survival – in the post-colonial, post-industrial shakedown.

#### AYUAMARCA

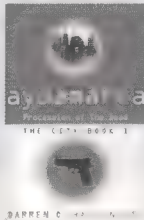
**Darren O'Shaughnessy**

Millennium pb, 404pp, £6.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant

Wiseguy wannabe Capac Raimi comes to the City and is taken under the wing of all powerful crimelord The Cardinal, becoming a man of power and influence. But success in his chosen career opens the door to a world of mysteries. Why can Raimi remember so little of his life before the City? What are The Cardinal's real motives? How do people disappear so completely that no one except him even remembers them? Who or what are the Ayuamarcans? Raimi's search for the truth leads him to a group of Incan priests with an agenda of their own.

This is a first novel, and it shows. The publisher's bumpf compares O'Shaughnessy to Banks and Barker, but that's just wishful thinking. He shares some of their fascination with the underbelly of life, but lacks the artistry to transform it into anything more. His writing is at best workmanlike and at times lapses into the sort of gaucherie editors are paid to keep well away from the rest of us, including what must be an early contender for the year's worst sex scene, with such infelicities as 'foliated oasis', 'liquid pool of life and love', and 'my sabre, her scabbard'. The plot is about as unlikely as it gets, with a negligent attitude towards reality, though it does rally towards the end and, to be fair,



this is billed as *The City Book 1*, so more explication might be forthcoming. Instead of characterisation we get overwrought caricature. Raimi is thoroughly charmless and unappealing, a jumped up Nazi in a designer suit. In more subtle hands his story might have been a powerful study of corruption and lost humanity, but all we have here is a second rate comic book adventure.

#### ThiGMOO

**Eugene Byrne**

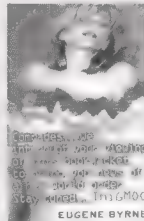
Earthlight pb, 345pp, £5.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant

The book opens with a mechanical sex doll (screw-bot) behaving badly in a bar and ends with a character comparing an unfavourable review to 'a large boil on one's posterior'. Between these two events we are introduced to the Museum of the Mind, a collection of erams (Electronic Replication of a Mind-set), historical personages created by computer programmers and able to converse with people in the real world, providing researchers with a valuable tool to explore the past. But a glitch results in the erams developing self-awareness, forcing the authorities to shut the Museum down. Some of the erams escape into the worldwide net and then, with the aid of a super computer, set about enforcing a global socialist utopia, ushering in a new age of peace and prosperity for all (the title is socialist jargon for This Great Movement of Ours).

The comedic and more serious elements of this book detract from, rather than complement, each other. The erams and related concepts are fascinating, but not explored in sufficient depth. For humour we get light-hearted banter and rather obvious political satire, plus authorial interventions intended to convey a madcap, anything goes ambience, but which won't impress anyone familiar with Sheckley, Sladek or Jeff Noon. In retrospect it's all rather too cosy, a parlour game with no real depth or consequences. Despite nuclear bombs and riots nobody actually gets hurt, not even the erams. We can't work up any empathy for the characters as we know nothing really bad will happen to them. While well written and mildly entertaining, it's not a book that fully engages the imagination or inspires much in the way of enthusiasm.

Possibly Eugene Byrne has a small pimple on his bum this morning.



#### THE DREAM ARCHIPELAGO

**Christopher Priest**

Earthlight pb, 264pp, £5.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant

This is a collection of six stories linked by a common setting, the Archipelago of the title, a neutral zone in a world at war. The opening piece, 'The Equatorial Moment', is a brief scene setter while, of the remaining stories, three were previously published in Priest's 1979 collection *An Infinite Summer* and have been revised for this book. With respect to Priest the stories do not, as

his publishers claim, form 'a tapestry in a manner reminiscent of Keith Roberts's great novel *Pavane*'. It's difficult to see what, if anything, is gained from the common setting, and the references to the war are often a distraction from what the stories are really about. One suspects marketing ploy, rather than creative necessity.

Considered individually the stories are excellent, touching on themes that inform much of Priest's recent work. In 'The Miraculous Cairn', arguably the best story, a pivotal childhood event which shaped the narrator's adult sexuality is re-examined, Priest cleverly manipulating the narrative to achieve a similar effect with the reader. Sex, possibly identified by the author as an area of human activity that blurs boundaries, plays an important role in all of these stories. Voyeurism is central to 'The Watched', a dramatisation of how an observer interacts with the thing observed and vice versa. In 'The Cremation' the protagonist's refusal of an assignation leads to him unwittingly offending against local custom, while in 'Whores' a man's brief dalliance with a prostitute and his rejection of any emotional involvement seems linked to the illness he contracts. An intelligent and thought provoking collection by a gifted writer.

#### HEADLONG

**Simon Ings**

Voyager pb, 325pp, £5.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant

When the AIs terraforming the Moon stage a bloodless coup their human co-workers are evacuated back to Earth and, as a precautionary measure, stripped of their sensory and cerebral enhancements. The victims of a new illness, Epistemic Appetite Imbalance, like drug addicts suddenly going cold turkey, the refugees have to deal with madness and depression any way that they can. Chris Yale attends an illegal drug clinic, but his estranged wife Joanne seeks a more radical cure and dies in mysterious circumstances. Yale's efforts to learn the truth lead him deep into a criminal underworld trafficking in dangerous drugs and banned technology.

Ings's fourth novel, and possibly his best, this book is a stylish fusion of hi-tech and noir. His assured prose conjures up images of beauty and pain, effortlessly creating a future that has depth and is totally convincing, a world in which a fragmented Britain is dominated by The Hague, where technology has grown beyond our ability to control or fully understand it, in which crime and big business rule the roost and ordinary people don't account for much. Yet it is Ings's people – characters like Yale, who must cope with a unique disability, and the pitiable Ballantyne, a corrupt policeman and failed astronaut – who drive the narrative forward as they struggle to find some form of redemption and so compellingly engage the reader's attention. Recommended.





**“For pity’s sake, O’Brien,” cried Winston, “what do you want me to say?”** O’Brien’s hand hovered by the control lever of the pain machine. Desperately Winston searched for words, but he had no idea which were the right words.

“You admire unfacts, Winston.”

“No. I mean yes. Yes.”

“You want the false version of reality to be the real one?”

“Yes, yes,” bleated Winston. He sweated copiously. “You know that.”

“I know *you*.” O’Brien adjusted his spectacles pedantically. “I’ve watched you for a long while. Your rectification of misquotes in *The Times* was almost masterly. Alas, you lacked that final vital ingredient: belief-unbelief.” The word and its opposite rolled off O’Brien’s tongue as one single concept. “Consequently your work remained a virtuoso exercise, a game. Which is more treasonable than incompetence.” O’Brien’s voice softened. He smiled a weary, almost loving smile. “I’m afraid, Winston, you were no metaphysician. But if we’re ever to beat the Enemy, you must become one.”

“Become one...of the Enemy? But I thought I *had* —”

O’Brien’s hand twitched slightly. Winston felt as though his whole body was being torn asunder, twisted out of shape forever. “So I’m being tortured,” he gasped, “because my work was *almost* masterly?” Again Winston’s body flooded with searing agony, worse than before.

the Enemy. There they have developed the antithesis of the thesis, the negation of the negation. And in America they have perfected Doubletalk. Whereas in east Asia they cope with the problem by means of disciplines rooted in Zen. Simultaneously: to exist, and nor to exist. To be *and* not-to-be.” O’Brien permitted himself an indulgent chuckle. “But you, Winston, are our latterday Hamlet. ‘To be or not to be,’ eh? One or the other. You aren’t unique in this. This form of thinking has its own roots deep in European rationalism — in the idea that there is one fixed reality founded on the evidence of our senses and historical records.”

Winston hoped fervently that O’Brien might carry on lecturing him for another two minutes, *five* minutes. He even hoped that O’Brien might be about to pull out of the bag the mental conjuring trick required to save him from further pain. But if the trick was simple, why then all the pain?

Winston closed his eyes, concentrating on the fact that for a few moments he honestly hadn’t known whether O’Brien had hurt him or pleased him, whether O’Brien was his father or the sun in the sky, the source of light. He felt he was very close to some magic formula which could free him from this torture seat, when O’Brien rapped out sharply, as if reading his mind exactly: “There *is* no magic formula, Winston! No simple Credo you can recite. Even now you’re trying to fool me, by fooling yourself.”



“That was stupid, Winston. This isn’t a punishment. Far from it! I’m taking trouble with you, because you’re worth taking trouble with. You do appreciate that?”

“Yes. I mean — ”

“You mean yes. You *aren’t* stupid, are you?”

“How do I know what I am any more?”

“Oh, but you do.”

For a brief instant Winston’s frame was torn by pain; but this time the respite from agony came so quickly that paradoxically it felt as though O’Brien had flooded him with balm and bliss instead.

Winston craned his neck against the restraints. Was there a second, concealed lever which pulsed pleasure into him? He couldn’t see, and for a few moments he was totally confused. Agony? Ecstasy? Which? Pain and pleasure had changed places. He no longer knew which was which. And in those moments he felt as if some barrier in his mind had almost fallen, and insight almost had illuminated him. He stared up at O’Brien’s fatherly face, feeling an awful sense of love.

“Ah.” O’Brien beamed down upon Winston like a friendly summer sun. Excellent!”

Sun...father...father, son. Even words had lost their meaning; the revelation had receded.

O’Brien spoke in a patient, schoolmasterly style. “In Russia,” he said, “they use the tool of the dialectic to combat

Hastily Winston opened his eyes. Yet O’Brien did not look angry. Rather, he seemed benign, serene, as he gestured to the black-uniformed guards. “Room 101,” he said casually.

“What *is* in Room 101, O’Brien?”

“You know what is in Room 101, Winston. Everyone knows. In Room 101 we keep the worst thing in the world.”

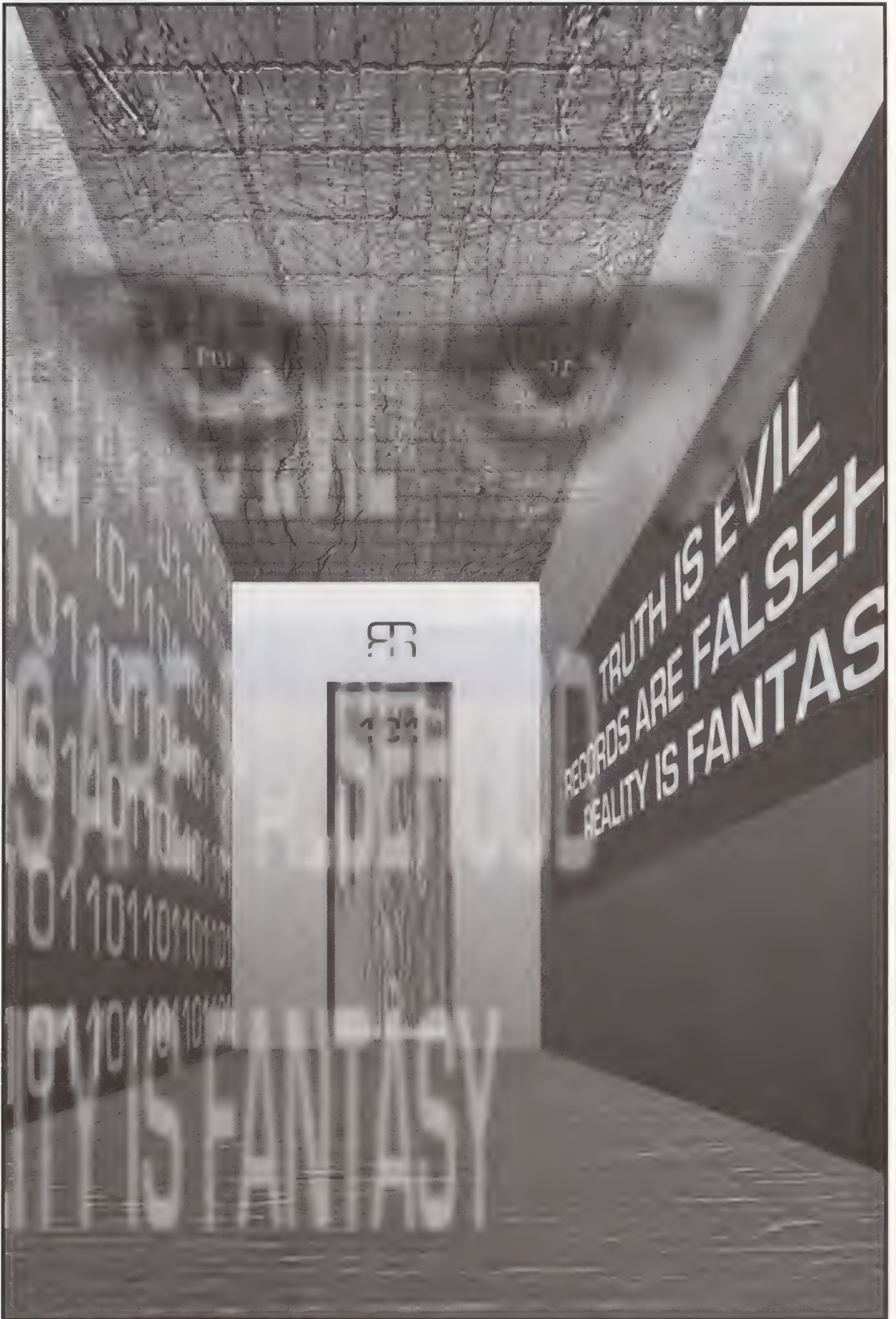
The guards released Winston’s bonds.

**Months earlier, Winston had commenced keeping a diary.** This in itself was not specifically forbidden. Several of his fellow workers at MiniReal, the Ministry of Reality, jotted private memos to themselves about the day’s news broadcasts. They were able, thus, once or twice a week to skip ‘voluntary’ evening attendance at their local Truth League building for updating on current events.

Admittedly, wall posters everywhere within MiniReal proclaimed, REMEMBER! RELY ON YOUR MEMORIES! Yet to Winston’s knowledge nobody had yet been liquidated for scribbling a few notes to assist their work of reality rectification the next day.

Of course, it was always possible that such memos to oneself might themselves alter overnight. That was why the taking of notes was frowned on during Truth League lectures; but one’s memory provided a check on the veracity of written memos.







Winston himself had never made notes; had prided himself on not doing so. It would never be Winston Smith who introduced an unfact into his work through lazy reliance on the written word. As a result certain of his colleagues regarded him as a prig. Yet all the while, in one compartment of his mind, he regarded the work he carried out with such zeal as essentially farcical: the equivalent of knitting a garment by day, which hidden fingers would unpluck during the night. Winston never quite understood this paradox about himself until the evening when he began his diary. He'd thought that perhaps he was simply terrified of scrutiny by the Truth Police.

But of course there was *the dream*, too...

He dreamt the dream once a month or so. He would be walking down a leafy lane lanced by golden sunlight. The whole world was at peace, and just around the next bend or the one after waited someone who would tell him the truth. Not merely any run of the mill, common or garden truth, but Absolute Truth, eternal verity which would answer all his questions forever. Sometimes he believed that the person waiting would be a man: a man with an unflinching granite aspect. At other times it would be a beautiful woman. Maybe the man was Winston himself, Winston transfigured; though who the woman was, he had no idea, unless she was the Goddess of Truth.

In order to reach the end of that lane he had to recite a long poem, about peace and joy, order and beauty. At some stage he always jumbled the words. Without intending to, he altered them; and woke up frustrated.

So, one bitter evening in April, after trudging back home

*Of course Tillotson in the next cubicle might have been working on the same story as me, maybe dozens of us were all working on it, but that didnt matter.*

TIMES 4 APR 84 SOV-PREMIER SPEECH MALQUOTED RECTIFY

*I never told anyone I have an almost photographic memory. I dialled the front page of The Times on the telescreen and read 'in Moscow yesterday Soviet Premier Kutuzov announced that the USSR is to reduce its nuclear arsenal unilaterally by 30 per cent. Said Kutuzov, "Our planet may be the only home of intelligent life in the whole universe. What criminal folly to imperil it! By switching arms spending into genuine space research I'm sure we can reach the stars." (Full text on page 7.) His speech was hailed in London, New York, Peking...'*

*Unfacts! Unfacts! Its the same every day at MiniTrue. Except for Sundays but then its twice as bad on Monday mornings with two days unfacts piled up. Its been like this for years. Our memories arent tampered with, but history changes — the history of a hundred years ago, the history of yesterday — and we have to change it back. Sometimes Christ was never crucified and we have to crucify him again in the history books. Sometimes Hitler was never born and the holocaust never happened. Myself, of course, I specialise in contemporary unfacts.*

*Its one damn thing after another, it takes most of the resources of the world, which is why the cigarettes are so foul and the food so tasteless. If we let up, we wouldnt be free human beings, we would be characters in a fiction.*

*How does it happen? How? How?*

*If the Inner Party knew, surely theyd have put a stop to it.*



to Verity Mansions through the windblown gritty streets, alone in his shabby flat Winston had started to write down the forbidden unfacts which he had been rectifying at MiniReal that day — as though by doing so, by recording those unfacts permanently, he might reach the end of that lane at last.

April 4th, 1984, he wrote. To help him concentrate he tapped out a cigarette from a packet marked 'Sooth Cigarettes'. This was harsh tobacco, rough on the throat, though the best that the beleaguered state could provide. Printed on the side of the packet was the standard reality warning, such as could be seen on hoardings all over London:

TRUTH IS EVIL  
RECORDS ARE FALSEHOOD  
REALITY IS FANTASY

Winston inhaled, and coughed. Suddenly words flooded from his inkpencil:

*April 4th, 1984. This morning at the Two Minutes Truth they showed clips of a treason trial in Russia. The criminal had a raggy beard and looked like a mad prophet. He worked for the Russian Recdep, their rectification department, and he abused his trust. He wrote a samizdat, a private news sheet full of unfacts which he called The Chronicle of Current Affairs. How we all cheered when they shot him! TruPol might get me too & shoot me but I dont care. Peace order beauty joy, thats the only way to reach the end of the lane.*

*So here goes. The first job I had today was a big one, the sort I pride myself on, nothing routine, something responsible.*

*Maybe the real question isnt how, but who? Or what?*

*If all unfacts were really facts, could I reach the end of the golden lane where the golden age of truth begins? If I write down the unfacts, will that make them stronger, more enduring?*

At this point his inkpencil dried up, and Winston had sat staring at the wall till the lights went out, as an economy measure, at twenty-two hours.

**The next evening, with a new inkpencil, he continued:**

*April 5th, 1984. The proles live in a golden fantasy, they believe the unfacts that keep on appearing in the newspapers even though the printers print the truth. They believe them in spite of all the power cuts and the missile crisis and the Verity coffee. But we cant stop printing newspapers and books. WE CANT! That would be to give up entirely, to lose our roots in the past even if its only yesterday, to lose ourselves forever. And not all the news is changed, only some.*

*I dont believe in God, I dont believe Gods doing this because if he was, if he existed at all, it would make nonsense of being human, nonsense of free will. Maybe theres no actual cause, maybe thats the answer. Its an absence of cause, of cause & effect, like a creeping sickness, an epidemic.*

*Everyone in the Party is fighting back, but its a grinding wearying job. I see the future as a big foot stamping false events on the face of time, and that face, a human face with its mouth wide open, is biting back*

Till the lights went out, Winston wrote down the unfacts he had rectified that day.



O'Brien was the man's name, and he was a member of the Inner Party. Winston had seen him often enough at a distance in the labyrinthine corridors of MiniReal, but on April the 9th O'Brien turned up just before the Two Minutes Truth and stayed right through it.

Winston had left his work reluctantly to attend the Truth, resenting the interruption. According to that morning's *Times*, Iran had declared peace on all her neighbours several weeks earlier, in violation of reality, and Winston had been ransacking his memories of recent Middle Eastern affairs when the buzzer sounded for the Truth.

Whilst everyone was settling in their seats in the assembly room, he still brooded about battles on the Khorramshar front, bombings of oil refineries, sabotage of supertankers. This was a ticklish assignment, and bound to end off upstairs in committee. The main trouble was that the Iranian fanatics accepted the false news much of the time, one of the reasons for the war being the Russian-backed Iraqi intervention aimed at imposing reality upon the Iranian government... This whole business was a nest of tangled snakes!

Trumpets sounded from the telescreen, and the Truth began; but not before O'Brien had slipped into a nearby seat.

A feverish euphoria soon gripped Winston, mounting to ecstasy, an almost sexual delirium, as the announcer's voice proclaimed the plain truth: of hijackings, minor massacres, missile tests, natural calamities. However, at the climax a little voice seemed to whisper inside Winston's head, 'Are these events any truer than the unfacts? *Need* they be any truer?'

Just at this point he noticed O'Brien observing him. O'Brien

table yet, so this must have been a deliberate choice, however casual it seemed.

A fat woman wheeled a trolley past, collecting greasy plates, cracked tea mugs, empty gin glasses, humming a tuneless refrain to herself. Probably she was a TruPol officer; and Winston had no doubt that several of his colleagues eating in this very room supplemented their ration coupons by acting as informers for TruPol...

When the skivvy woman was safely past, and before anybody else could join them, the girl apparently was seized by a coughing fit. She leaned right across the table. Her head lowered, she whispered, "I love you — spiritually. I fantasize about you. You're the most unreal person I know!"

Incredibly, three weeks later the two of them were sitting together demurely holding hands in a clearing amidst young elm trees and hazel bushes — at the end of a golden lane.

Julia had found this country hide-out on one of her outings with the Junior Truth League. She had whispered the route to Winston amidst a dense crowd milling around the foot of Verity Column, whipped up by a rumour that some truth saboteurs had been caught.

The hide-out seemed a paradise — and Julia was not a pervert or sadist or whore at all. She only pretended to be. Actually, she was sweet and pure and simple.

With a laugh she dismissed her work in Unpersec. "Oh, it's all such nonsense! Who cares if those filthy people existed or nor? We just have to cram our little heads with Hitler and the Marquis de Sade in case they disappear over-night, that's all."



alone seemed remote from the ecstasy of the Truth. The man sat like granite. And Winston understood: O'Brien was the man waiting at the end of the lane, the man that Winston could become!

After the Truth Winston felt wrung-out emotionally. Yet now he saw an ingenious way to rectify the Iranian situation. It was as if somehow those two minutes had rewired the frayed strands of logic and feeling in his mind. He even whistled as he walked back along the corridor.

A body brushed past, knocking him softly. For a moment a girl's face came very close to his, her dark hair swirling against his cheek. It was that girl from Unpersec, the Unperson Section! Unpersec's job was to scan all history books and edit back into existence persons who had vanished from the texts: persons such as Torquemada, Adolf Hitler, Heinrich Himmler. Obviously this was a vital job, yet it was common knowledge that Unpersec was staffed by people of low moral calibre: sadists, perverts and drug addicts who alone could edit such persons back into existence with equanimity.

Momentarily the girl stared into Winston's eyes as if to plumb the depths of his own depravity. She winked, then hastened on ahead whistling a parody of Winston's tune.

Winston felt befouled. He wanted to shear her long hair off, wash the greasy red lipstick from her mouth, then strip her roughly and scrub her all over in a cold bath with gritty carbollic soap and pumice stone.

It was a week later that the same girl sat down opposite Winston at a table in the canteen. No one else was at the

"If they did disappear," Winston said cautiously, "this wouldn't be the real world any more."

"Poo to that! Then the whole world could be just like this: a golden dream."

"And it wouldn't be true. We're the guardians of evil, you and I, Julia. That's what is really meant by the slogan 'Truth is Evil'. If all the evil truths get washed away, then we're lost. We'd have lost ourselves. Ah yes indeed, we're the guardians of evil."

"Really? I'm afraid that's way over my head. Look, Winny, if there was a great flood that washed every book and document away, we could start out again all clean and simple. Wouldn't that be nice?" She shrugged. "Since that isn't going to happen, who cares?"

"There's a flood all right, Julia. It's a flood of unfacts. Don't you ever wonder how it happens?"

"Of course I don't. That's boring. It's just a fact of life like the weather."

"I think maybe there's a secret organisation — which is tampering with reality. Its members are savants with super-human powers, using tools we can't comprehend."

Julia yawned and stretched her limbs in the sun. "Maybe the moon's made of green cheese, dear."

What if, wondered Winston, there really was such an organisation: one composed of supremely wise sages possessing extraordinary powers, operating out of a secret headquarters somewhere remote such as the Himalayas? If the Inner Party knew this, why didn't they atom-bomb the Himalayas or the Andes or wherever? Maybe they had tried, and failed.



What if these savants were more-than-men: a secret race who would one day supplant the human race? With a guilty thrill Winston contemplated this notion. Perhaps, perhaps he had himself already taken one small step towards joining this superhuman band. And perhaps one of this band, operating undercover, was none other than O'Brien!

Winston told Julia about his diary, his own humble chronicle of utopian unfacts. She seemed not to see the point of it, beyond murmuring, "What an unreal fellow you are, to be sure!" Soon she drifted off to sleep in the drowsy sunshine. Presently he slept too.

Later, after waking and tidying twigs from their clothes, Julia and Winston kissed each other chastely on the cheek before retracing their steps.

It was two months later, and they had started meeting in a rented back room in a proletarian district of the city. There Julia would wash off her lipstick, tie her hair up in a tight bun and occasionally permit Winston to kiss her upon those cleansed lips. "My unreal lover," she would whisper, giving the word its ancient, modest sense, "my fantasy friend. You are Abelard and I am Heloise. You're the Prince and I'm Snow White, though my hair is dark."

"Snow White slept in a coffin, Julia. That's where we're bound, too, on the day that TruPol finds out."

"Yes," she would sigh.

That particular evening Winston told Julia how O'Brien had stopped him in a corridor at MiniTrue. At last. At long last.

"I've been observing your work on *The Times*, Smith,"

memoranda. As soon as the servant had left, however, O'Brien looked up. "Shall you say it, or shall I?"

"I'll say it," said Winston. "I believe Untruths are caused by a secret society of savants who have evolved beyond the human race. I believe you're an agent of this society, risking your life at MiniReal for the sake of a future utopia when the human race will have forgotten all its tragedies and villainies, forgotten all our history, forgotten Auschwitz and Genghis Khan and the Inquisition. I want to help this society. I love Untruth."

"So do I," added Julia, though less firmly.

"And what would you do to help this, er, society?"

"Anything!"

"Would you be prepared to obliterate Shakespeare and Dante and Homer? Shakespeare for his tragedies, Dante for his Hell, Homer for his wars?"

"Yes!"

O'Brien asked several questions in like vein, to all of which Winston answered 'yes' enthusiastically, with Julia nodding along.

"Very well," said O'Brien at length. "There is a society of supermen who are behind the amelioration of the news and history."

"Amelio..."

"The bettering, Julia. Aiming at a bettering of reality itself — a world without war, cruelty or intolerance, without futility or tragedy. These supermen work from a distance to change the texture of the world, using meditation and mind-trance. Events themselves they cannot alter, but the record of events they *can*."



O'Brien had said, loudly so that anyone could overhear. "With approval, I might add. It so happens that I chair a committee concerned with micro-untruths."

"With — ?"

"Ah, but you wouldn't know about those, would you? Micro-untruths is our technical term for seemingly petty, trivial falsifications — as opposed to unfacts, which are gross distortions of major events. We believe that the force behind Untruth is stalemated — though not beaten — by our efforts. Now it is trying a different and more subtle ploy, namely the forgery of very minor banal details. This may seem mere pawn play, yet *en masse* it could link up into a deadly attack. I thought you might care to be co-opted on to my committee? Perhaps you would be so kind as to call at my flat one evening to discuss it?"

"I'd be delighted."

Excitedly Winston related this encounter to Julia; for obviously O'Brien's words concealed a very different message indeed.

Julia nodded, and yawned. A lone spider was dangling down from the ceiling, as if aiming for her open mouth.

"Ugh!" cried Winston, and threw his shoe at it.

A week later Winston and Julia worked up their courage to call on O'Brien in his Inner Party flat. A servant ushered them in: a little man with beetling brows, who might have been a deaf mute for all the noise he made.

The couple stood waiting across the shag-pile carpet from O'Brien's desk, while the man continued dictating top-level

"Yet people still remember, and set the record straight," said Winston. "Is that because the society won't allow itself to tamper with people's minds directly? Otherwise people would cease to be people, cease to be free?"

O'Brien nodded gravely. "You yourself will never meet any of these supermen personally. Nor will I. Neither you nor I can betray them, nor even prove the fact of their existence."

"Because they hide in the Himalayas?"

"Don't ask." O'Brien spread his hands expressively. "You mustn't ask, nor may I answer. But some day — perhaps tomorrow, perhaps in ten years time — you will receive a message to commit some act of sabotage inside MiniReal. Afterwards, possibly — just possibly — the society may be able to spirit you away to safety."

"In the Andes or the Himalayas." It wasn't a question.

"In the Andes," O'Brien echoed him, ironically, "or the Himalayas. And now you must both go."

"Will we talk together again?" asked Julia.

O'Brien regarded her thoughtfully.

"Only...only at the end of the golden lane!" exclaimed Winston in a rush.

"Only," agreed O'Brien, "at the end of the golden lane."

When they were arrested subsequently, Winston discovered what he had known all along in the core of his being: namely that the golden lane was one of the floodlit corridors deep in the basements of TruPol...

Room 101 seemed to him the deepest chamber yet, as though the whole world weighed down on it, compressing even the



air. The room was bare, but for a heavy metal chair and a table with something bulky hidden under a cloth upon it.

To Winston, strapped immobile in that seat, O'Brien said, "The worst thing in the world varies from person to person. Sometimes it is death by impalement on a stake through the anus. Sometimes it is death by burial alive. Occasionally it is something trivial, not even fatal. In your case, Winston, the worst thing..." And O'Brien whipped away the cloth.

Sick at heart, ice in his bowels, Winston mumbled helplessly, "Spiders... No, you can't do that to me, O'Brien, you can't. Can't, can't."

"Observe the construction of this box. It fits over your head thus. When I pull up this plate, the contents of the box will crawl all over you. Some will enter your nostrils; others will make their way into your ears. They're overcrowded in the box. They're in a bad mood. They're hungry. They'll spin webs. They'll sting and wrap. To them, your head is one big fly."

Winston heard a distant screaming. It was himself.

"One word of advice, Winston. Don't think too hard. Thinking won't save you."

Don't think? How could he possibly think anything? He had to stop the spiders. He had to *put something* between him and them. Something. Someone. "Don't do it to me!" he heard himself begging. "Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia!"

"You'll have to do better than that," remarked O'Brien sadly as the box was lifted over Winston's head.

"What do you want? Anything! Tell me!"

"Our Enemy is subtle." O'Brien's voice sounded very far

These days Winston was serving on O'Brien's committee for the detection and rectification of micro-untruths. So important was this work that Winston had been relieved of his previous task of correcting *The Times*. Yet the new work could be carried on wherever he chose, requiring as it did a different sort of vigilance. Everywhere now — on public posters, cigarette packets, tax forms, betting slips, beer labels — Winston was on the watch for micro-untruths. These could crop up anywhere; and did. Now that Winston looked back, he was terrified to think in retrospect how the whole fabric of human reality was being nibbled by moths, making tiny holes all over the place, whilst he had blithely assumed that major circumstances such as the arms race or Hitler were the whole of it.

Winston would have to detect all those moth holes, even if he couldn't catch the moths themselves; and spin little webs to repair them.

A shadow fell across his table. He looked up.

A woman with long dark hair, wearing red lipstick. Julia. And at once he could see that in some indefinable way she had changed. She licked those scarlet lips. "I'm evil," she murmured. "Evil through and through. Just yesterday I was in Unpersec busily restoring Gilles de Rais to the history books. Gilles was Joan of Arc's man at arms. And a sodomist and sadist. He tortured little boys in his castle dungeons. He was the real Bluebeard. I enjoyed restoring him. Because I'm evil, and evil is good because it's true..."

Winston nodded. It was quite safe for them to meet now, yet he had no real wish to talk to her; he had too much on



away now. Much closer to Winston's ears was a soft, gentle sound of infinitely many legs all moving. "Thought and science have failed to combat the Enemy. Our Enemy hides from us, masquerading perfectly. Perhaps the Enemy is ourselves, without our knowing it. Perhaps it is our own minds acting in concert, dreaming unfacts into existence, eating holes in human history..."

Words bled inside Winston's brain. To be or not to be! But there is no fixed reality! To be *and* not-to-be!

Spiders. He was a big fat fly. Suppose the spiders didn't know that? What if *he* didn't know it? What if the spiders thought he was something else? What if *he* thought so?

I'm not a *fly*! I'm not a *man*! I'm a spider too! A very big spider that no other spider would dare mess around with!

Winston felt hairs twitching all over him. He felt his limbs tip-tapping — how many limbs, four, six, eight? He honestly didn't know. His spinneret unwound silk from his bowels, his mandibles clicked.

He heard another click too — and he realized that the box over his head had not been opened. It had been closed. Forever.

When the box with its squirming cargo was removed, O'Brien stroked Winston's brow. Tears trickled from Winston's eyes. For he knew now that he did not merely love the worst thing in the world. He *was* it, himself.

It was the lonely hour of fifteen-thirty, at the Chestnut Tree café, and Winston's glass of Verity gin had just been replenished by the silent waiter.

his mind. Still, he felt bound to offer her a glass of gin.

Fortunately she declined the offer, and soon left the café without a backward glance.

Feeling peckish, Winston consulted the printed menu card. Food at the Chestnut Tree was rather better than your average processed soy. Not much; but somewhat. The spaghetti bolognese was Winston's favourite.

The printed price caught his eye. It was cheap, far too cheap! Surely it had cost more last week. Chestnut Tree café prices would have burnt a hole in the pocket of the Winston who had once corrected *The Times*. With inflation, there was no way the price could have gone down.

Hastily he consulted other prices on the list. Others seemed to have gone down too, though few as dramatically as the spaghetti. Trembling, he called the waiter over and pointed a quivering finger at the list. "Are these the *true* prices?"

The waiter peered at the tariff. He scratched his head uncertainly.

"Fetch the manager at once!" Winston ordered.

As Winston sat waiting, his trembling calmed. He began to feel full of resolute purpose and granite dedication. A real human being had to be harsh. For now the enemy of reality was everywhere. Winston both knew this, and did not know it; such was the nature of belief-unbelief.

Somewhere in the distance, a clock began to chime sixteen.

Ian Watson's most recent novel is *Oracle* (Vista pb, 1998) in which a Roman centurion encounters the Real IRA. Ian has just been appointed Toastmaster for Israel's ArmageddonCon at the end of 2000.



# PETER CROWTHER CORNERED



## Long, Long Ago, In A Galaxy Far, Far Away...

Back – *way* back – when I was a youngster (or, at least, younger than I am now), I used to buy virtually all the digest SF magazines that came out. I say ‘SF’ because there wasn’t much else available, although a lot of the stuff that these wonderful mags carried fell into the wider category of ‘fantastic’, in the true sense of the word.

*Astounding* was always a favourite (before it got changed to *Analog*), along with *Amazing* and *Fantastic* – the old Ziff-Davis titles that I’d come across as full-size pulps on a market stall (along with piles of *Weird Tales*, a day that will forever be etched on my mind) when I was around twelve years old – and obscure titles like *Worlds of Tomorrow*, *If*, *Future* and British masterworks such as *New Worlds* and its predecessor *Authentic*. But my out-and-out favourites were *F&SF* and *Galaxy*.

*F&SF* is still my only regular digest-buy but, of course, since the early 1980s, *Galaxy* is no more. It’s in the realm of the mythical now – all those wonderful stories, Willy Ley’s ‘Science Department’ articles, Groff Conklin’s book reviews and, most of all, those wonderful EMSH illustrations...particularly the covers for the December issues, invariably featuring wonderfully kitsch seasonal illustrations, such as the one showing Santa Claus on a rocket-powered sled dropping goodies into lunar domes festooned with holly wreaths, with the Earth riding high in the sky and folks inside dressing Christmas trees. Ah, but you know how easy it is for me to digress...

The thing is that, for a while, it looked like *Galaxy* was going to come back, going to rise Phoenix-like from magazine obscurity, though the potential cancellation of its death sentence was to come from an unexpected – and, for many at the time, unknown – area. The word was *Galaxy* was going to reappear...*online*.

I greeted the announcement – and I’m going back a few years

now, when I was even less technically adept than I am today – cautiously. *Online? What exactly did that mean?*

As it happens, I’m not actually sure it ever made it. And maybe that’s a good thing.

Of course, we all know now what that puzzling term means. It means you get to scroll down the 40 or 50,000 words that make up the average digest magazine, sitting cramped up at your word processor – probably using time that you should be spending working – treating the work you’re scrolling through with less attention than it deserves (mainly because you *know* you should be working and you’re feeling guilty as hell) while you try to find something that looks interesting. Then, either you read it right where you are – in all the comfort that the early astronauts probably enjoyed while taking a dump into the neck of a pop bottle – or you print it out. (Now that’s something right there: wasn’t the idea – or *one* of the ideas – behind online fiction that it saved trees? I’ve never quite figured out how that could be... printing out stories onto reams of paper. Maybe someone could explain it to me sometime...)

Anyway, the point of all this (yes, there *is* a point...just stick with it a few minutes more) is that I’m generally – and I emphasise the word ‘generally’ – against online *fiction*...and I also emphasise the word *fiction* here because I have no problem with online reviews or even online *non* fiction... which is very useful if you’re wanting a quick answer to a thorny problem you weren’t expecting and all the bookstores are closed.

Let me add, too, that there are some excellent online fiction sites around the place – some of which have carried my own work – and exposure of *any* kind is not something to be sneezed at, particularly if it leads the reader to search out more of your stuff in the traditional

I worked it out  
that, at the rate of  
two or three  
books or  
magazines every  
week, I should  
finish all the stuff  
I’ve bought (but  
have yet to read)  
sometime around  
my 150th  
birthday

setting for fiction: like in a book or a magazine, just like the one you’re reading now...enjoying the object of your interest in surroundings more conducive to your enjoyment of it, maybe curled up on the sofa, sitting on a bus or train, snuggled up in bed maybe. You just try hefting the old computer between the sheets and see how popular *that* makes you.

And, of course, you generally don’t get the great illustrations... and even if the site in question carries illustrations, there’s the old speed-of-your-modem consideration (which is fast taking over from the gobbledegook spouted at me by overalled mechanics in the days of my first car, all equally incoherent to me).

I’m fascinated – and, I admit, somewhat relieved – to note that the fears voiced by some early street-corner sandwich-board end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it doom-mongers to the effect that The Book was dead (and I number myself among their happy, wide-eyed throng) were rather premature. The main reasons, I think, are reasonably encompassed above, but there is one more...and it’s much more fundamental.

The printed word and the vehicles (the books and magazines I’ve been yammering on about) that carry it are not simply something to be *read*...they are something to be felt, and smelled.

Listen: ‘Hi. My name’s Pete Crowther and I buy books.’

Now why does that admission make me feel...grubby – like I’ve failed somehow? Kind of like the people who finally recognise they’ve got a drink problem and decide to do something about it, gravitating at last – usually after a long drunken haul of misplaced weekends during which they’ve also lost most of their friends – to one of those Alcoholics Anonymous meetings where they stand up and give their name followed by the less-than-revelatory announcement that they have a problem with alcohol. But the difference is that, while they’re actually trying to break the habit, I have no intention whatsoever of trying to stop buying books. Or magazines.

The reason that this is on my mind right now is a conversation I had at the recent EasterCon in Liverpool, during which someone questioned why I needed to possess so many books. And, you know, that’s a great question.



Driving home, it was the one thing from the entire convention that I couldn't shake free. And when I got home, I worked it out that, at the rate of two or three books or magazines every week, I should finish all the stuff I've bought (but have yet to read) sometime around my 150th birthday. It's a scary thought... looking around the shelves and realising that there are books here – for which I've shelled out real money – that I will die without having read. And I'm still buying them, at an alarming rate.

I buy them at bookstores (no surprises there) and from book fairs, conventions and even catalogues. Some writers' books I buy in different editions – the same book, for Chrissakes – and then the item gets slipped onto a shelf in the correct alphabetical slot, and forgotten about. So why do it?

The answer is both simple and complex. And it relates specifically to why I think *The Book* (my capitals) as a generic form will survive the recent onslaught meted upon it by its audacious young sibling the Web.

The printed form – the book, the magazine and even the comicbook – is a primal force, containing elements other than (and to some, *more* than) the primary function of disseminating either knowledge or entertainment. Take the comicbook as a first example.

Listen: 'Hi. My name's Pete Crowther and I buy books.' Now why does that admission make me feel...grubby – like I've failed somehow?

The new bells-and-whistles printing presses responsible for the American comicbooks of today may well be faster and more efficient (not to mention needing fewer humans to tend and generally babysit the equipment) than the old-style presses (based in, as I recall, Sparta, Illinois...a name that conjured such magic and mystery to my long-ago short-trousered counterpart sitting in a small house in the altogether more pedestrian-sounding Leeds, Yorkshire) that produced the comics of my youth but the finished product is a pale imitation of the original. And that, I believe, is one of the main reasons many folks pay silly prices for old issues of *Superman* and *Batman*. I know. I've done it.

Of course, there's no denying the simpler storylines and artwork (though I would – and do – maintain that, with few exceptions, the early comicbooks are superior in both of those departments, too) from the 1940s and 1950s, but just the way the colour stays on the page over the years is enough for me. That and the smell.

The smell of an old book – or even of the books produced today after they've been left for a few years – suggests age and care and work. Work that is intended to exist for a time, however long that time might be. Books smell of words, I don't care what people say. You need to *feel* a book, and,

occasionally – with the older books and magazines – you need to *hear* that rustling creak of the spine-binding as you open it up, watch the pages flop down on top of each other...so many wonderful pages...so many beautiful words...so many senses set to tingling.

Now, next time you log onto or tune into or download (or whatever the current nomenclature) a site, try this simple test: close your eyes and try breathing in the smell of the words, try to scent the story, to imbibe the syntax and the plot that were such fundamentally important parts of its creation...or try to hear the fainter-than-faint sound of pages turning as you read or of ancient glue cracking...and then open your eyes and attempt to flick back and study the cover, the brushwork or pencil lines of the artwork, try to consider the efforts of the repro house and the printer, and of the binder and the packers loading their silent but paradoxically chattering charges into huge boxes with the names of faraway bookstores or newsagents stencilled onto their sides... and then, only then, reach out to touch and feel the pages, try to discern the infinitesimally shallow indentations or virtually non-existent undulations made on the stock from presses pressing and inks inking...

For Horace Gold & *Galaxy*, with affection

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**"I've decided I'm a platonic lesbian."**

Lisa leaned into the turn, keeping her feet clear of the cement curb that separated the inside lane from the football field. The new tarmac surface absorbed each foot fall silently, and her breaths came rhythmically and soft. She maintained the pace easily, but Ruth running beside her strained to keep up.

"Bull," said Ruth. "Not meeting...the right guy...doesn't mean...there isn't one. And I...wouldn't mention it...to the head of the...department. She's not...that liberal."

They finished the turn and moved into the straight. An old man pulling a green oxygen tank on a tiny-wheeled cart like carry-on luggage walked purposefully the other direction in the outside lane. He waved again as they passed. Lisa nodded to him.

"I kissed a girl once, you know," said Lisa. She glanced at her watch as they crossed the start/finish line.

"You were...drunk, and...somebody dared you to."

"It wasn't that bad."

"And that's not...platonic."

"I didn't say I wanted to do it again."

"It's time...to stretch."

Lisa slowed to a walk as they moved off the track and onto the grass beyond the end zone.

"Thank god," said Ruth as they sat. She pressed the soles of her feet together and drew them close to her. "I love this position."

"You look like a little Buddha." The setting sun's warm glow cast a yellow light on Ruth. Dark hair and fair skin, eyes closed and content, a sheen of sweat on her face, Lisa thought that if Ruth wasn't god-like, she at least appeared as settled as a Zen master.

"What makes *you* happy?" Lisa asked. A gate clanked and the old man shuffled onto the parking lot and away from them. For the first time since they'd started their warm-up twenty minutes ago, they were alone.

Ruth smiled. "Oh, lots," she said. "It's a day to day thing. Like right this second, for instance, I'm glad to be doing this run. I'm glad the sunset is so beautiful." She opened her eyes and looked down as if in contemplation. "Heck, I'll tell you what makes me really happy. I turned forty last year, and my legs look as fit as any nineteen-year-old, and so do yours."

On the horizon, the edges of clouds were turning bright pink. Above them and to the west, everything celestial took on some shade of pink or purple or lovely soft grey. "Fifty miles a week will do that," said Lisa. "But I still think I'm damaged goods. I mean, where's my kindred spirit? Where's my ability to connect to another human being?"

"You've got me." Ruth lay back, straightened one leg and tucked the foot of the other under her hip.

"Do you mean that you are my kindred spirit, or that you don't know?"

Ruth smiled enigmatically, "You've got me." She switched to her other leg and stretched it. "But I'll tell you what. If I wasn't married, and I liked women instead of men, there's no one I'd rather sleep with than you. I've thought that ever since Mrs Vermer's sixth grade history class when you let me copy your answers. Blondes have always been my weakness anyway."



"Well, that's comforting, I guess. Futile, but comforting." Lisa stretched her legs in front of her and reached for her toes, lengthening the muscles in her back pleasantly. She laid her cheek on her leg. "Of course, sleeping with someone isn't really the answer. That slimy Ed Tindle in the apartment above mine has propositioned me about a hundred times. But, I mean, it's a kind of closeness, like a symptom of closeness. That's what I mean. A simple connection between one soul and another displayed through the physical demonstration of love. Of all the people I've ever met, you're the one I feel most attracted to on the spiritual level, and you're a woman I'll never sleep with, so I'm a platonic lesbian."

"I knew it. You just like me for my soul. Besides, last year you were a Taoist, and the year before that you were reading Tarot cards. For six months you ate nothing but ginger root, garlic and ginseng. Remember when you decided to become a nun when you were a freshman? This is a phase."

"Trying to feel close to the unity of the universe is *not* a phase. I've just attempted different routes."

"You've got to quit teaching philosophy," said Ruth.

Half of the sun had slipped behind the horizon. Lisa traced the path of her shadow across the field until it blended into the distance. From here, the high rises and hotels in down town Las Vegas caught the buttery light in a million reflections. "Speaking of routes. We'd better get going. It'll be pitch by the time we finish."

"I like night running," said Ruth as she levered herself off the ground. They walked a few paces, then broke into an easy jog as they left the track and headed toward the edge of town. Within a few blocks, they had left the city and they turned onto their favorite dirt road, a narrow, winding, hilly path that wandered into BLM land and the desert hills beyond.

"Universe," said Ruth, "is an oxymoron anyway."

"Nobody admirable comes to these parties," said Simon.

"Mostly football players and UNLV frat boys hoping to trick high school chippies into doing the horizontal bop in the back of their Broncos." The truck bounced out of one rut and into another on the dirt road. Simon stared morosely out the window. With the sun barely lighting the tops of the hills, the cactus and sage took on richer and deeper shades. If it weren't for their destination, he thought he would enjoy the ride.

Dave laughed at him. "You don't go to a kegger to meet someone to admire. You go to get primal: to dance and drink and let starlight fall on your head. Besides, *you're* going to the party, so admirable is as admirable does."

"I never understood what that meant, and you badgered me into it. I'm not responsible."

Simon braced his hand against the ceiling as the truck slapped hard out of a dip. Dave held the wheel almost casually, the other arm resting on the door and an open can of beer firmly placed in his crotch. "Parties are live in the moment kind of affairs. They don't stand up to analysis."

The vinyl under Simon was old and cracked, but slick. Every yaw or pitch of the truck slid him to one side or the other, and there was no real way to brace himself. He thought, at least



Dave can hold onto the steering wheel. If we go too much farther, I'll be sick. The rocking, bumping ride mimicked his place in the world, he thought. Nothing to hold on to, and no guessing which way to lean. He grabbed on to the door jamb and willed himself to stay still. He hated whining and self-pity, and he had to admit that lately he'd been both. His ruminations, though, kept going that direction. "That's not the problem, anyway," said Simon. "It's the vacuousness of humanity thing again. Everywhere I go, I find flawed, contaminated, thoughtless people."

"Thank you very little."

"Well, it's me too. Where's the decent role model? Where are the human beings who have some sense of where they stand in the world; who really know who they are? Look at me. I'm twenty, switched majors four times, changed religions twice, fell in love with half a dozen girls, read every book on metaphysics I could get my hands on, and I'm still a boat adrift. Where's the sense in that?"

The truck strained up a steep section, spinning dirt for a second, then grabbed solidly, bucking them over the top. Below, in a wide, sloping bowl where several rude trails and roads intersected, a score of trucks and jeeps had formed a semi-circle around a huge pile of wood, ten feet wide. A trail led away from the fire up the steepest part of the hill, and Simon could see it was a perfect amphitheater for a bonfire kegger. A steady bass throbbing reached them from even this distance; the speakers rested on top of one of the trucks.

"It's probably the books, man: your studies," said Dave. "You ought to major in something practical like PE, where the only thing we worry about is how much air to put in a volleyball or how to eat a balanced meal. Look at the bright side: maybe somebody will do something really stupid at the party and you can write another one of your depressing poems about it." He cranked the wheel to miss a boulder in the road, then let the truck coast the rest of the way down the hill until he parked it next to a brand new Ford Explorer.

Simon yanked hard on the door's latch and threw his shoulder into the door to get it open, then stepped out. Groups of people stood by the piled wood, around the keg and next to some of the trucks. Beer smells mixed with dust and juniper, and the music slammed across the whole scene, resonating in his chest. "I just need a luminous moment," Simon shouted. "I need a sign that humanity's worth the effort."

Dave came around the front of the truck, beer can in hand. "What?" he shouted back.

In the valleys, cool patches of air washed across Lisa's face and hands. After five miles of up and down running, she felt a steady warmth in her hips and that perfect proportion of effort to breathing that marked her best runs. Ruth puffed along behind her in the purple dusk. By now, though, she was completely warmed up and had lost the gasping quality of her speech at the track. Overhead, the brightest stars were just peeking through, and Lisa knew the full moon would be up soon.

"Do you know where we are?" Ruth said.

"I think we went along the top of that ridge over there last week." She waved at the bluff to their right. From the top of this hill, she could see the steady undulation of rising and falling land before them. To her left, probably two or three miles distant and hidden by the intervening landscape, lay the highway; but here, they were alone in the desert, following a narrow but fairly smooth motorcycle trail. "I figure," said Lisa, "that we can cut right in fifteen minutes or so, find a way up the ridge and head back." She let the slope give her momentum on the way down, shifting the pressure away

from her lungs, and she tried not to slap her feet too hard, which would eventually make her knees sore.

"You're obsessing about the impossible," said Ruth. "Nobody connects with anyone else. It's an integral feature of being self-aware. Besides, it's not all that important."

"Really?" said Lisa. The trail turned left, became rocky for twenty paces, then settled into a dry stream bed where the sand was soft and sucked a little bit at her shoes on each step. Between the hills, the air smelled moist and alive. At the top, the searing dryness of the day had tempered to the faint emanations of sage and cactus. "To me, it's all important. How could anyone live under those conditions? Either you *believe* that you communicate with people, or you *actually* communicate with them. If you admit that you don't, then you're saying that you go it alone. Existence would be mean, isolated and pointless."

"You're communicating with me."

Lisa laughed. "Words are about a thousand miles from experience, and we're talking, which is at least better than writing, but none of what I say to you will let you really understand what it is to be me."

A trail led up out of the stream bed and toward the ridge. Lisa turned on it and toiled heavily up the steep route until it flattened out above the stream. She felt each step, how the dirt squirmed on one stride, how her foot hit a little uneven on the next, how her calves strained on each push-off, how the air rushed out of her lungs and then back in like a little beach covered and revealed by waves. She felt coolness on her neck, slick with sweat, and all these things she felt, she grieved that she couldn't give to Ruth. Ruth heard her, she thought, but she'd never *be* her.

"So we communicate," said Lisa, "in the least efficient way. All I want is to be completely understood, and to completely understand somebody."

"Sex," said Ruth, "won't do that."

"Yes, I know."

A small hill, only a ten foot climb, rose before them. "Watch," said Lisa. She charged up the slope, and at the top, spread her arms wide, palms flat like wings and sprung up; paused for an instant, suspended, then fell back to earth. "Night running is for flying."

For a mile, they ran that way. Arms out, swooping into turns, flapping like loons and laughing. They found a trail that led up the ridge and crested it. After a bit, they settled back into their pace, and Lisa's thoughts focussed on the dark, the brilliant glister of star light and the impenetrable shadows beside each rock and plant.

"Listen," said Ruth after a rare, long, flat stretch. The glow of the moon cast their shapes ahead of them; the reflected glare of Vegas lights painted the sky before them. "Isn't that music?"

In the distance, Lisa heard a steady thrum of a bass, as if the hills had a heart and the pulse was near.

**The running back, Phoenix Carlson, jumped over the fire first.**

Simon had found a comfortable place on the truck's bumper to sit, and he'd filled one of the plastic beer cups with soda he'd brought so no one would force a beer into his hand. They'd lit the fire a half hour earlier, and now the flames leapt twenty feet into the night sky.

Music slammed. Some people danced. Most just moved around in a kind of human Brownian motion, bouncing off each other, running here and there, wrestling, talking; and Simon was embarrassed by how horny it all made him. Firelight washed over coeds in brief midriff T-shirts, firm bellies catching the flames and then hiding in the shadows. They were all smiles and curves and sinuous motion. Long



legs, short legs, slim builds and full ones. The whole idea of gawking at them with unfocussed (and unmotivating) lust shamed him, because he hoped he was a more noble person than that. So he took to watching the fire for a while, but, without even recognizing when he started, he caught himself staring at a beautiful girl in a tight grey UNLV baseball jersey tucked into a short, black skirt.

"Have you noticed," yelled Dave over the music, "how cool the sparks are?" Simon looked up. Much of the wood must have been damp, because frequent, tiny explosions sent sparks flying randomly. Like launched pin-point coals, they spiralled skyward then died.

"Yeah," said Simon. It was then that Phoenix Carlson started his long run down the hill toward the fire. Simon heard his whooping yell, a weird two-toned cry that cut through the music, and he caught a glimpse of him just as he entered the circle of light, a bottle in one hand, a manic grin on his face, and way too much inertia to stop. Then Phoenix jumped straight into the flame. For a blink of time, Simon believed he'd just witnessed a suicide. Impossibly, though, the football player emerged from the wall of fire, hit the ground howling with joy and rolled ten feet. For a second, no one moved. Then his friends crowded around him, thumping his back, slapping his hand, offering him beer, even though he still held the bottle.

How imbecile, Simon thought. In his expensive looking, long-sleeved football sweats, and the bottle dangling from one massive paw, the man presented a ridiculous figure. Surely, Simon thought, on a night like this, he has to be sweating like crazy. He's got to be wearing the football stuff to impress the girls.

Simon was about to say 'That was really stupid' when Dave said, "How great! I've got to try it," and he rushed up the hill. A handful of others joined him, and soon, one body after another hurtled through the flames, each behaving as if the leaping pyre had washed them clean and they were for a moment reborn.

From the speakers on the truck, a softer song started, something acoustic, and now the crackle of the wood was noticeable, and each fire-leaper's yell was clear. A guy in a letter jacket dove over the wood as if sliding into home plate and landed in the dirt on his chest. A gangly kid in sunglasses broad jumped, then sprawled on his face, as happy as could be. The girl in the UNLV baseball jersey cleared the fire like a track star negotiating an obstacle, and her expression was serious and measured in the air. Her smile afterwards seemed self-congratulatory, as if she'd beaten some inner demon in the flame.

Fire light reflected off the circled windshields and headlights. It frolicked in everyone's eyes.

"Simon," said Dave, breathless and giddy, "you've got to go through. It's a club, man. Baptism by fire."

Simon shook his head. There was an element of beauty to it, the bodies in the air, the flame swallowing and parting, the sparks fluttering up and out; the music and beer and energy, but he couldn't join in. Phoenix Carlson did something stupid, and everyone imitated him. No heroes in this crowd. Just thrill seekers and kids playing follow the leader.

"Your loss, man. Tomorrow you'll be kicking yourself in the head for missing another opportunity to do something wild." Another girl jumped through, the heels of her shoes catching the coals on the edge, scattering them in a pulsating fan. Dave said, "You know what I've noticed? None of your poems are in first person. They're all about what somebody else did." He ran by the keg to refill his cup, then disappeared up the hill again where Simon could see, by the light of the full moon, the crowd lined up to jump.

After a flash of indignation, Simon slumped against the truck and the cool smoothness of its bumper. It's true, he

thought. Maybe I'm just missing life by standing on the outside looking in. Maybe I ought to just join the fun and stop thinking about thinking. But he didn't move. Now the fire-jumpers were going for style. One boy arched backwards and grabbed his feet as he went over. Another came through with legs and arms splayed out, and another wrapped a blanket around his neck like a cape and floated out of the flame as if Dracula had returned and the night of the living dead was upon them.

Then, Phoenix Carlson yelled again, his peculiar, two-toned scream coming down the hill toward the bonfire. The people who were still in the circle of light stood transfixed. Phoenix was coming again, the legend, the first man through the inferno. And he was drunk, very drunk. His last time around the keg he'd knocked it over, then fell down himself, crying at his foolishness. "It's okay," someone had yelled, and Phoenix had stood in dignity, brushed himself off and apologized to everyone.

And in a flare of light, Simon could see him, barreling down, fast and unstoppable, a fundamental force of nature, as irresistible as an avalanche sweeping toward the bonfire, and the spectacle sickened him. Simon looked away. How, with no brain cells left, could anyone look to Phoenix Carlson for leadership? What was there to admire? What did it say about humanity?

And while he was looking away, a movement caught his eye, at the top of the hill on the other side of the party. Someone was coming. They were running too, but controlled and smooth along the top of the ridge. Two women, a blonde in front and a dark haired one behind; and the image was incongruous and alien. How, in the music and drunkenness, in the flame and raw sensuality of the party, could two *joggers* show up? They were miles and miles from the nearest road, even, but here they were, sliding down the trail with the deceptive ease of long distance runners. In the moon they glowed; and for a second Simon thought of Valkeries riding from Valhalla: the blonde woman in front was some kind of angel, not really touching the ground so much as passing above it, and he could feel his jaw drop and goosebumps tingling on his arms. Nothing could seem so out of place or surreal. It was like the painting of a middle class living room complete with flowered couch, and in the middle of the room, as realistic and palatable as that couch, floated an alpine mountain. Either one by itself was fine, but who could picture them together?

Then Phoenix Carlson reached the gap between two trucks, his head down and arms pumping, screaming his victory cry. And the crowd watched his progress. And the golden joggers came down the hill.

Then, just where he should have leaped, Phoenix Carlson tripped. And instead of rising over the fire, instead of creating the moment of glory and the triumphant retreat from the edge of disaster, he vanished head first into flying wood, scattering coals and scorching heat, and he didn't come out.

**Lisa said, "It's a party." At each hill top the music intensified, and soon she could see flickering of light on the surrounding heights that suggested a still out of sight fire.**

"Should we go around?" said Ruth. "Some or our students might be there. We'd probably not be welcome."

But there were no side trails and neither of them was foolish enough to run across the cactus-strewn desert by moonlight. It would be a sure invitation for a foot full of needles and a long, limping walk home. So they ran on.

A few minutes later, Ruth said, "You were saying?"

The music rang clear now and Lisa caught a good, solid whiff of wood smoke. She said, "Only a teenager thinks sex is an answer, but there's still something in it — a moment sometime that's close to what I'm talking about. Maybe only a metaphor of it."



"It can be pretty darn good on its own," said Ruth, "without standing for anything else."

"No, you got to follow my thought here," Lisa said. As they topped a rise, she caught the first glimpse of the fire, but the trail led down again and she lost it. "It's that moment when the lovers move beyond conscious thought — and, of course, it doesn't happen lots of times, but sometimes it does — and they're each doing for the other as if they're doing for themselves. You never know it when it's happening, but you remember it later. The isolation is lost, or there's an illusion that it's lost, and that's what I'm talking about."

"Whew!" said Ruth. "I love it when you get smutty."

Exasperated, but laughing, Lisa said, "Ruth!"

She said, "Sorry. I know what you mean."

The trail took them up again, and followed the line of a ridge directly above the party. A group of people clustered around the kegs, and a few others leaned against trucks or stood talking, and the fire illuminated them all in mellow shades of gold and saffron yellow, like a Maxfield Parrish painting where everyone is lit by the last rays of a setting sun.

Then, the trail turned down, and Lisa could see that they would pass right through the circle of cars to where their path continued beyond. It was the only way to go. They had no choice. So she started down, hoping that no one would notice them, or that no drunk would make a scene.

Then someone screamed, an odd two-toned wail, and Lisa saw a figure charging toward the fire. Then he didn't turn where he would have to turn to miss the fire. Then he didn't jump where he would have to jump to clear the fire. He tripped instead and became one with the light.

**Simon didn't remember pushing away from the truck.** Suddenly he was running, and he saw, as if frozen in amber, everyone staring, but no one moving. Even the sparks from the fire seemed suspended. Time ceased, but he didn't know what he should do; he just knew he had to move, and he was on the edge of the bonfire.

He wasn't there first.

**Lisa didn't break stride, but stretched out, when the man fell into the fire, and found herself there, not thinking, heat baking off her face, and in the middle of the flame and wood bending down to grab the dark figure sprawled face down in the middle.** Dimly she heard screaming, and it sounded like Ruth; and a little part of her mind said 'You're standing in coals, you'll burn, you'll burn', but another part acted on its own, grabbing him by his arms that were up, so his hands could cover his face, and she leaned backwards and tugged, but he barely moved. Then arms circled her waist; she saw them come round, and she tugged again as they tightened against her, hauling her back, and the man in the fire slid toward her; and she braced herself to pull again, and the arms around her waist loosened to help her do it, then pulled with her a second time. There was no thought at all. No plan. She leaned; the arms let her. She fell back, and the arms gave her strength. A third time, and the arms were not separate; they were her; they were her own muscles straining against the weight of the man in the fire, pulling, moving, straining. Flames flew up, past her, around her, and she could see down into the blaze: individual timbers, cracked and pulsing with fire life, pushed aside to accept the shape of the man. And the force around her belly consumed her and lifted her when she yanked the last time, and the man was free. They were out of the fire.

**The woman, the blonde angel jogger, was in the fire, and Simon's mind reeled at the sight. What should I do? he had**

thought, and this woman was there, doing it, standing in the midst of the bonfire, reaching down to grab the football player from his certain death.

Nothing compared. Nothing came close. No gesture he'd ever seen even touched the image of the blonde woman in a jogging singlet, skin slick with sweat, charging into the flames without pause.

She tugged at the man, and Simon could see she would never get him to safety on her own. He stepped forward himself; he grabbed her around the waist. He pulled when she pulled, and the man was free.

A crowd surrounded them, beating at the burning spots on Phoenix's sweats, and they rolled him over. His hands still covered his face, and Simon could see they were burned badly. His hair smoked; his ears already blistering. The front of the sweats were melted and smoldering. Then Phoenix moved his hands away and started laughing. Impossible, Simon thought, he's not dead.

Words slurred, silly with drink, Phoenix said, "You guys are all sissies. It doesn't mean a thing until you crawl right into the fire," and he passed out.

Simon looked around. Where was the woman who braved the flames? Was she hurt? Who was she? And what he wanted most was to talk to her, to try and tell her what it meant to see a human do the thing she'd done. How awesome, he thought, and he thought of how many times he'd heard others use the word without any idea what it meant. Then, he saw her. She was, already, running, the dark haired one behind, and without looking back she ascended the hill until she was only a silhouette against the moon, and she was gone.

**"Are you alright?" asked Ruth as they ran down the first hill.**

Lisa blinked her eyes trying to see the trail, waiting for her night vision to come back. "Huh?" she said finally. "Oh." She tried to think about the question, what it meant, and she rubbed her hand across her stomach as she ran; the feel of the arms was still there, the memory of shared effort. "Yes," she said, then. Gradually, the moon revealed the path, a silvery ribbon wending its way between boulders and sage, clear of cactus and soft to her feet. "I've got some blisters," she said. "My shoes are shot."

**And she was gone. Six guys lifted Phoenix to the back of a truck and wrapped him in blankets to take him to the hospital. Everyone else headed for their jeeps or trucks. The fire they would leave to burn out on its own.**

Simon looked up at the hill where the moon stood high and he had seen her last, but she stood before him in an after-image, strong and sure and swathed in flame. Then Dave clapped him on the shoulder. "Hell of a thing to do, fella. That was one hell of a thing."

"Yeah," Simon said. "I guess so."

They walked to their own truck. Dave said, "You know, it's weird, but wasn't that woman your Philosophy professor?"

The bonfire crackled quietly behind them. Now that the music was off, and all the others were gone, it was the only sound in the desert night. "I don't know," he said. "Who she is isn't as important as what she is."

Dave shrugged.

Simon thought about the slick vinyl in the truck. He thought about sliding around without an anchor. "Why don't you let me drive?" he said, and he did.

James Van Pelt has had (and will have) stories in *Analog*, *Odyssey*, *Realms of Fantasy* and *Weird Tales*. He also has a short story, 'The Big One', on the preliminary Nebula Award ballot, and has been nominated for a Hugo.



# THE CINEMA

**Watching *Crash* in 1997 I remembered a much earlier connection I had made between David Cronenberg and JG Ballard. Twenty years ago, in a small West Cork cinema called the Broadway, I first saw *Shivers*, on a double bill with a film whose title I don't recall. A few months later I read Ballard's *High-Rise* and was excited at the many points of connection between the two. Both film and novel have as their settings high-rise apartment buildings constructed away from the inner city — on an island outside Toronto in the case of Cronenberg's 'Starliner' complex, and in London's docklands in Ballard's high-rise. Both buildings are completely self-contained, having their own shops, schools, swimming pools, restaurants and liquor stores, and both are inhabited by members of a bourgeois elite. Their main protagonists are white, male doctors, and both depict — though they have different antecedents — the disintegration and descent into sexual violence and murder of their closed societies. Ballard's novel was first published in 1975 — presumably being written in '74 — the year that *Shivers* was produced. A startling case of synchronicity, but one that, years later, made perfect sense when I first heard that Cronenberg was filming *Crash*.**

Cronenberg was born in Toronto in 1943 and majored in English and Science at the University of Toronto. From early on he'd considered a career as a writer, but while at university he developed an interest in film, making two shorts, before directing his first feature, *Stereo*, in 1969. Although little seen, this experimental science fictional exploration of voyeurism, sexuality and telepathy, was notable for introducing what would become a recurrent theme, the subversion of the flesh resulting from surgery. He followed this with *Crimes of the Future* (1970), which, like its predecessor was admired by critics in Europe and the US and almost completely ignored in Canada. In the film, all post-pubertal females have been killed off by toxic cosmetics which have also begun to devolve males towards a primitive stage of humankind's existence. A group of academics ponder potential 'crimes of the future', foremost of which is paedophilia for procreational purposes. In retrospect, its preoccupation with the subversion of evolution through genetic engineering and other experimental scientific practices, has marked it as a key film in what has since been recognised as a distinctive Cronenbergian oeuvre.

Having established a reputation as something of a modernist autuer, Cronenberg's first three commercially mainstream productions, *Shivers* (1974), *Rabid* (1976) and *The Brood* (1979), saw previously supportive critics turning against him, dismissing them as repulsive and disgusting. In the case of *Shivers*, which was funded by the Canadian Film Development Corporation, there was outrage that public money should have subsidised a film in which an aphrodisiacal parasite turns its hosts into sexual maniacs. One critic, Robert Fulford, went so far as to title his review 'You should know how bad this film is. After all, you paid for it'. Although made on minuscule budgets and, in the case of the first two, without recognisable actors the audience could identify with, all three were commercial successes. They also helped earn Cronenberg the reputation of 'the King of Venereal horror', not that Cronenberg was averse to such publicity, wryly observing that although it was a small genre, he was at least 'its King'.

With hindsight, it's difficult to understand such reactions to these 'Body Horror' films. Each explores and expands on themes introduced in the two experimental films, as well as offering a critique on our unquestioning acceptance of the paternalism of the medical profession, and satirising the liberal sexual behaviour of bourgeois society of the 60s and 70s. Robin Wood, in his influential 1979 essay *An Introduction to the American Horror Film*, saw Cronenberg's films as motivated by a loathing for sexuality, in particular for female sexuality, an accusation which allowed Wood to categorise them as examples of 'Reactionary Horror'. On investigation, such criticisms have little substance. In *Shivers*, although the parasite is passed on to Starliner's male inhabitants by the sexually voracious Annabel Brown, we learn that it was secretly introduced into her body by its creator, Emil Hobbes, who has been 'molesting' her since she was twelve. As with Rose (Marilyn Chambers) in *Rabid*, the violent release of Annabel's sexuality stems from male experimentation on unwitting females. Thus the 'sexual disgust' which Woods sees as manifest in these two films can be interpreted as the legacy of male subversion of female sexuality. In all three films, Cronenberg questions the supposed objectivity of doctors and scientists. Hobbes, a professor of 'venerology and psychopharmacology', develops the parasite as an alternative to organ transplantation. Once introduced into its human host, so the



by  
**MIKE  
O'DRISCOLL**



left

David Cronenberg filming *eXistenZ* (1999)

below

James Woods as Max in *Videodrome* (1982)

theory goes, the parasite would assimilate and take over the function of a defective organ, such as the liver, surviving by taking a little blood for itself. But as in many Cronenberg films, there is a schism between the theory and practices of speculative science, the latter resulting in accidents which can be seen as metaphors for an Emergent Evolution — a process whereby species evolve through random mutations (which can have technological as well as biological causes), rather than through gradual development. In *Rabid*, following Rose's motorcycle accident, Dr Keloid uses her as a guinea pig for his experimental plastic surgery in which skin used for grafting is treated to make it 'morphogenetically neutral'. In neither film is the ostensible white, male hero able to save the woman or re-establish the status quo.

*The Brood* has been read as a misogynist film, and although the charge has some basis, the murderous intentions of Nola (Samantha Eggar) once again stem from the intervention of a male doctor. Dr Raglan (Oliver Reed) has written a book called *The Shape of Rage*, which advocates an extreme form of psychotherapy through which patients manifest their inner rage as horrific lesions and tumours. Nola's anger at her parents has become manifest in a brood of psychopathic infants who act on her rage. Although functioning as a metaphor for Nola's emotional anger, the brood can also be seen as a filmic manifestation of Cronenberg's own emotional turmoil, stemming from a messy divorce and prolonged custody battle. This is not to excuse the theme of the sins of the mother being visited on their daughters (witness the disturbing ending which sees Candice, Nola's daughter, beginning to display her own lesions). But one cannot accuse Cronenberg of showing his male characters in a wholly positive light — it is Candice's father, the sympathetic Frank Carveth, who triggers Nola's final murderous rage when he is unable to hide his disgust at the sight of her external egg-sac. For the first time here, Cronenberg was able to use name actors, Eggar and Reed, and, more importantly, his concerns with the psychodynamics of family life revealed him as a director able to transcend the supposed limitations of the horror film.

Between *Rabid* and *The Brood*, Cronenberg made the atypical *Fast Company* (1979), a competently made drag-racing movie which reflects his own love for the

## DAVID CRONENBERG: THE POETRY OF FLESH





sport. Although avoiding the usual macho clichés associated with the genre, the film is of more interest for being the first Cronenberg film to be shot by Mark Irwin, whose washed out and wintry cinematography would feature in all of Cronenberg's films up to and including *The Fly*.

Separated by *Videodrome*, are two films in which Cronenberg develops another early theme. Although very different in terms of their source material, realisation and style, *Scanners* (1980) and *The Dead Zone* (1983) share a preoccupation with the effects of psychic powers on the individual. Rather than being a source of strength, these powers are posited as ones which, although benefiting the species as a whole, are seen to blight the lives of their central protagonists. In *Scanners*, Vale (Stephen Lack) discovers that he and his brother Revok (Michael Ironside) were the original in utero guinea pigs for ephemerol, an experimental tranquilliser used on pregnant women (echoes of thalidomide). The drug has caused them to develop scanning powers which allow them to control others' central nervous systems. Helped by Dr Ruth (Patrick McGlohan), head of an organisation which has developed a treatment allowing scanners to control their power, Vale has to do battle with Revok, who is intent on creating an army of evil scanners to take over the world.

If Lack lacks the emotional depth to bring Vale to life on screen, the same cannot be said of Christopher Walken, who brings a subtle vulnerability to his performance as the alienated Johnny Smith, hero of *The Dead Zone*. In this, the first Cronenberg film not scripted by himself (it's based on Stephen King's novel), Smith is a teacher who spends five years in a coma following a car accident. Recovering, he finds that through touching people, he can see both their past and future, and later discovers that he has the power to alter the course of their lives. The space between what he foresees and what he might change it to, is the dead zone of the title, so called perhaps because of the physical toll each psychic occurrence enacts on his health. Even in this most unlikely of Cronenbergian films, as in *Scanners*, it seems that the flesh demands a price for the enhancement of the mind. These films show Cronenberg developing both as a storyteller and a visual stylist — particularly in some of the astonishing set-pieces in *Scanners* — Revok using his power to explode the head of an enemy, and Vale causing the technological equivalent when he scans a mainframe computer through a phone line. More crucially, apart from Lack, Cronenberg elicits some great performances from his actors, from the eccentric McGlohan and the wonderfully megalomaniac Ironside in *Scanners*, to fine support from Brooke Adams, Martin Sheen and Tom Skerrit in *The Dead Zone*. To date, the latter rates as one of the finest of the many large or small screen King adaptations. *Videodrome* (1982) and *The Fly* (1986), are key films in the Cronenberg oeuvre in that they represent his most explicit depictions of the philosophy of an emergent evolution, though in very different ways. Each also expresses concerns only previously implied — the effects of film, television and video on the viewer (and the implications for censorship), and our very real fears at the ways in which we are betrayed by our bodies through aging and disease.

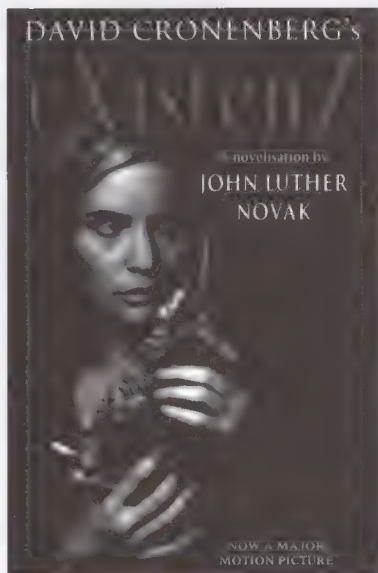
*Videodrome*, more than any of his previous films, established Cronenberg as an auteur. He had by this time, assembled a trusted crew, including cinematographer Irwin, editor Ronald Sanders, production designer Carol Spier, and composer Howard Shore, who has scored all of Cronenberg's films from *The Brood* to the present, excepting *The Dead Zone*. *Videodrome*'s story, such as it is, concerns cable station owner and porn freak Max Renn (James Woods, in possibly his best role), who is on the lookout for 'sensational'. Through his friend Harlan, who picks up pirate broadcasts on his satellite dish, Renn gets to see fragments of the sadomasochistic Videodrome show.

Samantha Eggar as Nola in *The Brood* (1979)





## eXistenZ



## eXistenZ™

John Luther Novak\*

Pocket Books pb, £6.99

After a terrorist disrupts a demonstration of a pre-release version of the groundbreaking virtual reality game eXistenZ, its inventor Allegra Geller and security guard Ted Pikul escape into the landscape of middle America with the sole copy of the game. While Allegra is anxious to determine the extent of the game's damage, Ted is forced to rise to feats of heroism as the couple run into murder and sabotage at every turn. Hiding out in the mountains at an abandoned ski chalet, Ted and Allegra find themselves dragged into a bewildering labyrinth of betrayal and death, where reality merges with fantasy and they can trust no one, least of all each other – for who can tell where real life ends and the game begins?

A vivid, tense novelisation of the new Cronenberg film.

\*the pen-name of Christopher Priest

Becoming obsessed with these depictions of what appear to be real torture and murder, Renn first begins to act out his fantasies with Nicki Brand (Deborah Harry), and then tries to track down the source of the transmissions. He encounters the media prophet Brian O'Blivion (Jack Creley), a McLunhanite media prophet who may be connected with the videodrome signals which not only begin to hypnotise Renn, but which also trigger his evolutionary adaptation to the hegemony of video and his eventual transcendence of it to become the first creature of the 'new flesh'.

As the boundary between reality and hallucination becomes increasingly blurred, the exposition of Cronenberg's themes take precedence over plot resolution. Some critics have attempted to sum up the film as an attack on television and video (the latter just beginning to break through as a form of mass entertainment in 1982), but such a view is too simplistic. The point is not that television turns Renn into a programmed killer, nor that the moral malaise of late 20th century western society has its origins in the 'filth' we watch as 'entertainment'. Rather, it is that whatever the content — whether wholesome, morally uplifting fare or supposedly disgusting works such as Cronenberg's 'body horror' films — we are all to some extent programmed by television with the world view of those who control the medium (a point emphasised by the vaginal orifice in Renn's stomach, through which he receives the organic software which 'programmes' him to assassinate Videodrome's enemies). The viewer is made complicit in Renn's voyeurism, and like him we become unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality (witness, at the time of writing, the widescale acceptance in the west of the blandishments of our leaders that Milosevic and his army can be 'degraded' through air attacks alone).

The real targets of *Videodrome* are those censors who attacked Cronenberg's earlier films. He has said that censors act in the same way as psychotics — they confuse reality and fantasy. What the film suggests is that the suppression of images considered dangerous or provocative, is futile. Most people can distinguish between reality and illusion, something which the process of censorship seems to deny; those who can't see the difference will find other triggers to psychotic behaviour if prevented from seeing disturbing or provocative images that are clearly fantasy. This is to make *Videodrome* sound didactic and heavy-handed — it's not. As in earlier films, there is a vicious streak of black humour running through it (witness the title of Nicki's radio phone-in 'the Emotional Rescue Show', or the 'Cathode Ray Mission', a kind of soup kitchen for street bums deprived of access to television), a characteristic which along with its thematic concerns, make it a template for the look and feel of the cyberpunk genre — an accolade usually bestowed on the more conventional *Bladerunner*.

The connection between *Videodrome* and *The Fly* lies in their protagonists' initial fear of their transformation, followed by their curiosity and eventual acceptance of their evolved condition. Just as Renn embraces the 'New Flesh', so Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum) comes to terms with his horrific metamorphosis. Co-scripted by Cronenberg and Charles Pogue and based on the 1958 original, *The Fly* is an exploration of the mortality of flesh and the autonomy of disease. Brundle is a brilliant but socially naive scientist who is close to perfecting a matter transmitting device. Encountering journalist Veronica Quaife (Geena Davis) at a seminar, he invites her to record the final stages of his experiments, leading to the teleportation of a human being from one pod to another. Overcoming various mishaps — such as teaching his computer to understand 'the poetry of flesh' — Seth eventually successfully teleports a baboon. By this time he and Veronica have fallen in love, but when she leaves his warehouse lab/apartment to confront her boss about trying to steal her story, Seth gets drunk and teleports himself, unaware of the housefly with which he shares the pod. Thereafter, Seth's metamorphosis begins, until, at the climax of the film, after having tried to splice his genes with Veronica's in order to increase the percentage of human genetic material in the hybrid, and having instead fused himself with the metal telepod, Seth persuades Veronica to shoot him.

Although working on one level as a pretty straightforward sf/horror film in the manner of *Alien* — replete with superbly realised sfx, a strong storyline full of wit and tension, and an likable central couple played superbly by Goldblum and Davis — *The Fly* also succeeds as a meditation on the collision between science/technology and the human mind and body. Although lacking the hubris displayed by Shelly's Frankenstein, Brundle's fate is inexorably bound up with his recreation of himself. Whereas Victor Frankenstein hoped to conquer death, Brundle's metamorphosis serves as a metaphor for an acceptance of our fears of aging and disease. Early on in his transformation, Seth removes a couple of fingernails and asks 'Am I dying? Is this how it starts?'. Towards the end, his concern is primarily for Veronica: having explained his desire to be the first insect politician so that he can teach them the



compassion they lack, he warns her to leave. In a line of unbearable poignancy he tells her, 'I'm an insect who dreamt he was a man and loved it. But now the dream is over, and the insect is awake. I'm saying, I'll hurt you if you stay'. *The Fly* remains the most accessible statement of Cronenberg's themes and also the most commercially successful of his films.

For *Dead Ringers* (1988) and *M Butterfly* (1993), Cronenberg moved away from science fiction and drew on two fictional works based on true stories, meaning that although containing moments of shocking violence, they largely eschew the sfx heavy gore. And yet each is recognisably Cronenbergian for the ways in which they continue his exploration of the split between the flesh and consciousness, probing into the nature of individual identity and raising new questions about sexuality and misogyny. It's no coincidence that the lead actor in both films is Jeremy Irons, who, in *Dead Ringers*, plays the Mantle twins, a pair of gynaecologists with their own successful practice in Toronto. His superbly controlled performances, full of different nuances and mannerisms, establish Elliot and Beverley

as two separate characters. Elliot, the older of the two, is the more confident and outgoing, expending more of his energies on soliciting funds for their clinic. Beverley is shy, sensitive and more obsessed with his research. The first time we see them as kids, they discuss a 'kind of sex where you wouldn't have to touch each other', and this seems to express the film's key theme: a dread of emotional intimacy. Throughout the film, they confuse emotional and physical intimacy, seeming to think that the way to understanding the former is through the latter; hence, the proper way to understanding women is from the inside out. Of course this implies that what you see on the surface cannot be trusted, a point Cronenberg underlines with cruel irony through the manner in which they deceive their lovers, with the cocksure Elliot first seducing them, before letting Beverley take his place without the women's knowledge.

A similar theme emerges in *M Butterfly*, scripted by David Henry Hwang, from his own play and again inspired by real-life events. Here, Irons plays Rene Gallimard, a minor French diplomat in Peking in 1964. Gallimard falls for a Chinese opera singer, not realising that 'she' is male. Song Liling (John Lone) continues the deception in order to obtain French Intelligence from Gallimard and pass it on to the Communist government. Although Liling somehow manages to keep most of her clothes on during sex — the mechanics of which are largely left to viewers' imaginations — one is initially tempted to ask how the sexually experienced — and indeed married — Gallimard could be unaware of Liling's true sex. But as the story unfolds it becomes clear that he is complicit in Liling's deception. This point is made by two lines, the first spoken by Liling in response to the question of why female roles in Chinese opera are always played by men: 'Because only men know how women are supposed to act'; and later, back in Paris after nearly twenty years together, after Gallimard's continued treachery has been discovered and Liling's true sex revealed, Gallimard says, 'I'm a man who loved a woman, created by a man. Anything else, simply falls short'. Both lines expose a male fear of and a wish to shape female sexuality. Although written by Hwang, the lines connect with the central theme of *Dead Ringers*. In the same way that the Mantle twins mistake a knowledge of the workings of flesh for intimacy, Gallimard and Liling wish to create a thoroughly male construct of women.

The catalyst to the disintegration of the Mantle twins is Claire Niveau (Genevieve Bujold), an infertile actress whom Beverley discovers has a 'trifurcate' cervix. Elliot, posing as Beverley, sleeps with Claire, then passes her on to his brother. Beverley and Claire fall in love and he tells Elliot he wants to keep her for himself. Threatened by this intimacy, Elliot says, 'You haven't had any experience until I've had it. You haven't fucked Claire Niveau until I've fucked her'. Soon, the continued deception



Marilyn Chambers as Rose in *Rabid* (1976)



## eXistenZ

written & directed by David Cronenberg  
starring Jennifer Jason Leigh, Jude Law, Willem  
Dafoe, Ian Holm, Christopher Eccleston  
97 mins, cert 15

reviewed by Gary Couzens

Reclusive games designer Allegra Geller (Jennifer Jason Leigh) is about to demonstrate her new game, eXistenZ. It's played by jacking in a semi-organic games pod into a 'bioport' in the player's spine, which causes elaborate, plotted hallucinations. Surviving an assassination attempt, Allegra goes on the run with company junior Ted (Jude Law).

Cronenberg's first original script since *Videodrome*, *eXistenZ* is an assemblage of many of the director's themes and images. Like *Videodrome*, at least half of the action takes place inside its central characters' heads – precisely how much is reality and how much virtual is left ambiguous at the end.

The film is a lightweight, more than usually humorous take on its subject matter. It's more accessible than *Crash* or *Naked Lunch*, but one wonders how non-Cronenbergians could approach it. It does benefit from strong lead performances from Leigh and Law, plus Cronenberg's well-paced direction.



Jude Law & Jennifer Jason Leigh in *eXistenZ*

takes its toll on Beverley and he develops an amphetamine habit. In trying to help his brother, Elliot develops his own drug problem and towards the end, when Beverley thinks he has been abandoned by Claire, the brothers' identities once again seem to merge, making them indistinguishable, in personality as well as physically (a point rammed home in the film's one explicitly Cronenbergian scene, a dream sequence in which Beverley sees himself joined by a horrible umbilicus to his brother), so that they become two facets of a single consciousness.

While Hwang's polemics against western imperialism — in particular against white male fantasies about submissive Asian women — seem to burden the more subtle ideas relating to a preference for an illusion over reality, *M Butterfly* is nevertheless a thought-provoking film. Both Irons and Lone do well in difficult roles, and Peter Suschitzky's fine camerawork is full of telling contrasts of tone and light that underline the different cultural and social agendas of the French and Chinese. *Dead Ringers* though, is Cronenberg's most powerful and disturbing work, where themes of the mind/body schism, drugs, insanity, power, identity and omnisexuality all fuse together to form a new, Cronenbergian genre. His directing is unobtrusive, avoiding quick, MTV type edits in favour of long camera shots which help in revealing the nuances of his characters. Suschitzky's cinematography is again superb, contrasting the sterility of the Mantle's apartment with the rich (blood?) red surgical gowns they wear for their gynaecological operations. Howard Shore's music is perhaps the best work he's done, and in Bujold and Irons — the latter giving the best performance in any of the director's films — Cronenberg shows just how good he is at coaxing great performances from his actors.

For his adaptation of William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1991), Cronenberg has taken scenes and characters from the novel (as well as from others including *Junky* and *Exterminator*), and combined them with scenes from the writer's life in the 1940s and 50s. Although long thought unfilmable because of its preoccupation with heroin use and drug addiction in general, as well as passages of bizarre and violent sexual behaviour, what Cronenberg has done is to have Bill Lee (Peter Weller) write the text that will become *Naked Lunch*, believing that he's filing intelligence reports from Interzone to his alien spymasters. In fact Interzone (based on Burroughs's actual sojourn in Tangiers), with its ejaculating mugwumps and typewriters with chatty sphincters, are no more than a product of Lee's drug induced hallucinations, brought about by a combination of addiction to a drug given to him by Dr Benway (Roy Scheider), and guilt at the accidental killing of his wife Joan (Judy Davis) in a stoned re-enactment of the William Tell routine. Confused? It helps if you bear in mind a line that Lee (working as a bug exterminator at the time) contributes to a rambling literary discussion between two writer friends — based on Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac — 'Exterminate all rational thought'.

Cronenberg's film is not so much about drugs — references to real-life drugs have been replaced by made-up drugs derived from yellow bug powder or from a black powder extracted from giant centipedes — as about the relationship between a writer and his work. By fictionalising Burroughs's own life in the film, Cronenberg is able to plunder it as source for the book within the film that becomes *Naked Lunch*. Unfortunately, this intertextuality rarely helps to illuminate the creative process of writing a novel. Rather it serves to remind the viewer of Burroughs's own textual joke in which, in the novel's preface, he claimed to have no memory at all of writing the novel. It may be that his wife's death was the catalyst to Burroughs becoming a writer, but, once you get beyond the hallucination to that part of Lee's consciousness that remains connected to reality, the point seems too obvious. As bold and ambitious as *Naked Lunch* is — it has some truly audacious visuals, and gives full reign to Cronenberg's black humour — I'm not convinced that it works. By smoothing the edges off some of the novel's more bizarre sequences, Cronenberg has removed their subversive quality. Even Benway is reduced to little more than a joke, a cartoon Hannibal Lector without the wit. Compared to the ideas and themes exploding out of *Videodrome*, *Naked Lunch* is less cinematic feast and more Cronenbergian snack.

*Crash* is superior both as a Cronenberg film and as an adaptation of a cult novel. Shifting the action from 1970s West London, to a near-future Toronto, *Crash*, while not as extreme as the novel, nevertheless contains some of the most outrageous images and provocative ideas ever put on screen by a commercially successful filmmaker. It achieved notoriety in Britain even before it was released due to self-righteous campaigns by certain critics and newspapers to get the film banned. Even many of those who defended the film did so halfheartedly, claiming that it was unerotic and worse, boring. To deal with the latter point first, this is perhaps the least violent of all Cronenberg's films — a shame, given his unique approach to the way violence is handled on screen — yet it is so full of challenging ideas on the nature of our



relationship with technology and in particular our fetishisation of the automobile, that to dismiss the film as 'boring' seems perverse. Whether or not it is erotic depends on your own particular fetish. But for sure in the culture in which I grew up — the rural south-west of Ireland in the 70s — the car was the site of most of your sexual experiences. More than this, it also served as a metaphor for aspirations towards freedom, rebellion — and, contradictorily, adulthood — as well as sex itself. You might not get laid on a regular basis, but by God there wasn't much else to beat the adrenalin rush of tearing along a winding country road at breakneck speeds with little attention paid to such minor details as safety belts or the amount of tread on your tyres. And who can deny that advertisers have long equated sex and automobiles? Whether or not you believe there's an element of exploitation in the Claudia Schiffer Citroen advert is irrelevant — the subliminal connection is made.

In the film, James Ballard (James Spader) crashes into another car killing its driver and severely injuring its passenger, Dr Remington (Holly Hunter), and himself. He meets Remington in the semi-deserted hospital in which they are treated (it's reserved for the victims of possible air crashes), and also encounters Vaughan (Elias Koteas) a hospital orderly obsessed with famous auto crashes. Ballard is masturbated by his wife Catherine (Deborah Unger) and then expresses regret at having missed the funeral of this victim. Catherine responds that they bury the dead too quickly, and that 'they should leave them lying around for months'. On release from hospital, Ballard, Catherine and Dr Remington become embroiled in Vaughan's obsessions, attending re-enactments of famous car crashes, in particular James Dean's death in his Porsche Spyder. Vaughan, who not only drives but 'lives in' a Lincoln Continental — the make of car in which JFK was assassinated — tells them of his plans to stage the ultimate crash, the death of Jayne Mansfield, in which his stunt, rather than the novel's version which has Vaughan intending to deliberately kill himself by smashing his car into Elizabeth Taylor's limousine. At one point, Vaughan makes explicit his project — 'the reshaping of the human body by modern technology' — claiming it's something we're all involved in, and it is this, with its allusions to *Videodrome* and *The Fly*, that shows why Cronenberg was so attracted to the book. It offers him another avenue through which to explore the possibilities and potentialities of an emergent evolution.

The performers in the film have been criticised as emotionless but such an accusation misses the point. These people have become dehumanised by technology — they get more excited by talk of sex than the physical act, particularly in the scene where Catherine quizzes Ballard about Vaughan's penis and anus. Given their air of vacuity, Spader and Unger are perfect in their roles and Holly Hunter gives a marvellous performance as a woman totally bereft of human emotion. Rosanna Arquette has less to do as the crippled Gabrielle, whose costume and leg braces offer a glimpse perhaps, of the reshaped human form that Vaughan has in mind. It's strange that one of the things that so upset the *Daily Mail* was the scene where Gabrielle has sex with Ballard. What are they saying? That the disabled shouldn't have sex, or shouldn't be allowed to feel sexy? As well as the performances, Howard Shore's music, with its jagged guitars and edgy synthesizers, is perfect for the unsettling mood of the film, and Suschitzky's cinematography gives the film a suitable cold, sterile and futuristic look.

If the explicit indicators of a Cronenberg film are the revolt of the flesh against rationality, strange sexual behaviour, insanity, drugs, bizarre violence, alienation and a fragmenting of a fixed identity, then what do these characteristics signify? Surely it's too easy to sum up Cronenberg by saying that his films are no more than a cinematic working through of his private obsessions. The moral malaise which affects his characters and which, in the films, is manifested as a mental and physical corruption, is one that we are not immune to. Cronenberg recognises the worst effects of technology on society and the moral vacuum that is left behind when human values are replaced by an excessive emphasis on order, rationality and the intellect. That's not to say he retreats from science, but that his films expose the fear and repressions that science was supposed to have liberated us from. Given this, it's strange to think what Cronenberg would have made of some of the mainstream films he's been offered, among them *Top Gun*, *Beverly Hills Cop* and *Flashdance*, but certainly one can imagine what he might have done with *Total Recall* had he taken the opportunity to direct it. As enjoyable as Verhoeven's film is, the material, with its confusion between true and false memories, between reality and illusion, seemed perfect for Cronenberg. In the last year or so, he also passed on the rights to *American Psycho*, a shame since his cool, detached and blackly comic style of film-making seem tailor-made for Brett Easton Ellis's novel. In the meantime, we have the release of *eXistenZ*, a return to the sf genre, in which Cronenberg combines game-playing and biology, a film which will hopefully take the flesh beyond the computer screen.

## FILMOGRAPHY

- 1966 **Transfer** (short)  
*writer/director*
- 1967 **From the Drain** (short)  
*writer/director*
- 1969 **Stereo**  
*writer/director/producer/  
cinematographer/editor*
- 1970 **Crimes of the Future**  
*writer/director/producer/  
cinematographer/editor*
- 1974 **Shivers**  
*aka They Came from Within  
aka The Parasite Murders  
director/writer*
- 1976 **Rabid**  
*director/writer*
- 1979 **Fast Company**  
*director/writer*
- 1979 **The Brood**  
*director/writer*
- 1980 **Scanners**  
*director/writer*
- 1982 **Videodrome**  
*director/writer*
- 1983 **The Dead Zone**  
*director*
- 1985 **Into the Night**  
*actor*
- 1986 **The Fly**  
*director/co-writer/actor*
- 1988 **Dead Ringers**  
*director/producer/writer*
- 1989 **Nightbreed**  
*actor*
- 1991 **Naked Lunch**  
*director/writer*
- 1993 **M Butterfly**  
*director*
- 1995 **To Die For**  
*actor*
- 1996 **Crash**  
*director/writer*
- 1999 **eXistenZ**  
*director/writer/producer*



## In September, the rain began.

Frances Tovey saw the very first droplet. She was sitting on the steps of the hotel with a glass of clear water by her side, glancing from the surface of the lake before her to the surface of the white marble beneath her. Idly, she noticed the transient ripple of some small creature moving beneath the skin of the water; idly, she traced with her eyes the blue-grey pulse of the veins that grew beneath the skin of the stairway. Then a raindrop fell, a solitary raindrop. It fell into her glass — not into the lake, nor on to the stair, but directly into the centre of her glass, so that the ripples drifted out over the water in a bulls-eye pattern. The droplet had been quite round and clear, like a tiny sphere of crystal. For a moment, Frances imagined she could see it inside her glass, tumbling down through the water. Then she blinked, and the image vanished, as if the droplet had just in that instant dissolved.

The holiday had not been a great success. Edgar, of course, had chosen the hotel, and decided when they were to go, and for how long they should stay. He had wanted to go away together, he said, so that they could rediscover some of the passion of their earlier years. Frances, for her part, could not admit to him that what she really wanted was some time away from him, perhaps in a wide open space, the desert or the open sea. In the end, when the old passion failed to awaken, she had been given a part of what she wanted: Edgar had taken himself away along the green lakeside for the greater part of each day, and lunched alone on the fish that he caught.

The hotel was an odd one, and Frances liked it for that. It had two faces, one open to the road, the other looking out over the lake. It had been built on top of a steep hill, so that the road fell away in a series of sharp bends before it flowed into the highway. On the other side, fully thirty-nine marble steps led down from the broad white balcony, all the way down, into the water. There were more steps beneath the surface of the lake, as if one could walk down into the water and find another road leading away across the silent lands of the lake-bed. Frances could not see how far down the steps went, and Mr Mycroft, the proprietor, could not tell her. He stared at her when she asked him, and as he stared she noticed how his face was so pale that it was almost white, and how the blue-grey veins could be seen below the surface of his skin. He shook his head, and apologised for being unable to help her. Then he excused himself, saying he had something to attend to at the front of the hotel. But this *is* the front, Frances thought to herself, and then wondered where such a strange idea could have come from.

More rain was falling, bringing the lake to shivering life. Frances noticed, though, that no more droplets fell into her

glass. Before she went back inside, she raised the glass to her lips and drank the clear water, and the one droplet that had been dissolved there. It was pleasantly sweet. She left the glass where it was, standing alone in the corner of a marble stair. Later, when the waiter came to collect it, he was surprised to find that although the rain had not yet stopped, the glass was still empty.

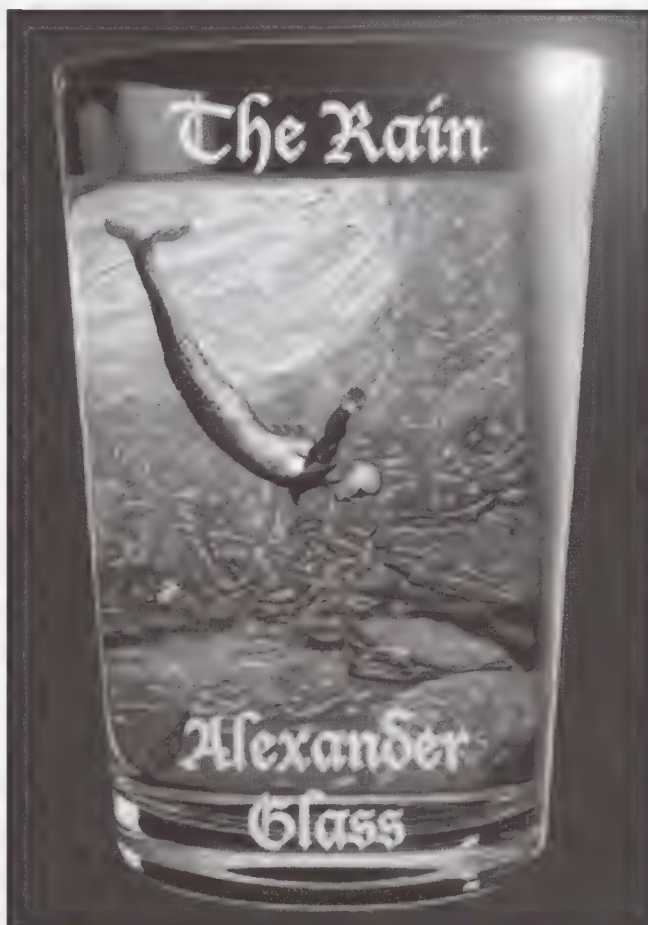
The hotel was not quite empty, but it was almost so. Apart from Frances and Edgar, there was only one other couple, Zenobia and Marshall Ross. They had matching blue eyes and looked very alike; at the beginning, Frances had mistaken them for brother and sister. They were very young, taking a second honeymoon only six months after the first. They were having the holiday that Edgar had wanted to enjoy. The only other guest was a black woman whose name Frances had never discovered. She seemed friendly enough, and smiled whenever they passed each other in a hallway or on a stair,

but somehow Frances was daunted by her, and they had never really spoken. With so few guests, Mycroft kept only a handful of staff. There was a single waiter, who also served as the hotel porter and general helper, and a single maid who also served, Frances suspected, as Mycroft's mistress. Mycroft took all the chef's duties upon himself, and he had been seen once or twice guiding a trolley laden with delicacies to the room where Adela, the maid, lived. At least, it was always assumed that the trolley was laden with delicacies; but the plates were always hidden beneath shining silver domes, and no one knew for certain what was really underneath. Perhaps the plates were empty. For that matter, no one knew for certain whether Room Thirteen was really the maid's room. Perhaps it was Mycroft's own room, and Adela lived somewhere else. Or perhaps no one lived in that room at all.

"I can't believe he makes any money," Edgar murmured to his wife at dinner, as the proprietor walked nonchalantly away from them, wheeling his mysterious trolley in front of him and wearing what seemed to the guests to be a most enigmatic smile. "After all, there's almost no one here. He has to pay the staff, who have practically nothing to do. He has to pay for the upkeep of the building — that must be costing him a small fortune in itself. There must be food rotting away in the larders, and wine turning to vinegar in the cellars."

"Maybe he doesn't want to make any money," Frances conjectured. "Maybe he loves the old place, and wants to see it being lived in. Maybe he's an eccentric millionaire, playing at being a hotelier."

"More likely he inherited the place from an evil old relative, and now he can't escape from it. Imagine, being trapped in a hotel for the rest of your life. He probably can't go on holi-





day himself. He couldn't stand to see the inside of yet another hotel room."

Frances pushed her sliver of ice-cream around in her dish. "I thought you liked it here."

"I did. I do. It's a nice place to visit, if you can get used to having no TV and no radio. It's peaceful. The country is the most beautiful I've ever seen. But even so, I wouldn't want to live here."

"No," Frances agreed. She put her spoon down, and reached over to take his hand in hers. He looked at her in some surprise. "I know where I would like to live," she said, with the sense of letting out a secret that had been trapped inside her far too long. "I'd like to live somewhere open, somewhere where you can see the horizon — and not only see it, but walk to it too, without coming across anything bigger than a mouse until you reach the edge of the world." She looked away, wondering if she had said too much, too quickly.

Edgar stared down into his bowl, frowning. "I wish this rain would stop," he said at last.

The rain paid no heed to Edgar's wishes. It continued falling through the night, drumming on the roof, clattering against the windows, creating thousands of tiny splashes as it met the surface of the lake. Frances convinced herself that if she listened very carefully, she could hear the sigh that was made by the raindrops falling through the air. She could not sleep. At another time, she would have found it easy to sleep when the rain was falling. The sound was soothing, comforting somehow; and it was good to know that she was safe inside while the rain fell outside. At another time, she would have simply curled up beneath the covers and drifted away into a peaceful, dreamless sleep; but tonight she found it impossible to keep her eyes closed. She was not tense or uncomfortable; in fact, she felt quite relaxed. Edgar was snoring gently in the bed beside her, his back turned to her, but the noise would not normally be enough to keep Frances from sleeping. She lay awake all night, listening to the rain, until a soft blue light began to grow on the edge of the eastern sky. She got up and dressed, in the hazy blue glow of dawn, and crept out of Room Five, and out on to the balcony. The sky was carpeted with heavy clouds, stretching from horizon to horizon, right across the world. The rain showed no sign of easing off, much less of stopping. Frances made her way down the marble steps, slippery with water now, to the spot where she had been sitting when the rain began. She counted the steps as she descended: one, two...eight, nine...thirteen...thirty-one, thirty-two...thirty-eight. One of the steps had been swallowed up during the night. The water had risen the length of her hand. She stood on what was now the bottom step, thinking that wherever the stairway led once it broke through the water's restless skin, there was now one step further to travel.

Breakfast was a more lively affair than usual; the guests had been given something to talk about, and they seized the opportunity with relish. Marshall and Zenobia Ross looked tired. Frances guessed that it was not the rain that had kept them awake. Mycroft looked a little off-colour — if someone so pale could ever be said to be off-colour — as if he had eaten too much sugar and cream. As the conversation went on, Frances at last discovered the name of the fifth guest. She was called Clarissa Hall, and she was a columnist on a newspaper that Frances never read.

"I telephoned the paper this morning," she was saying, "as soon as I woke up. They say there has been heavy rain

all over the country, and other places too. Rivers have burst their banks. Low-lying towns are flooded. Sewers have overflowed — city streets are swimming in shit. Power lines are down. People are dead, people are injured, people are missing. Children and pets and farm animals have been washed away."

"So," Frances said, wondering vaguely whether Clarissa wrote her reports and commentaries in the same way she spoke, "how long do they think the rain will last?"

"They don't know. They just don't know. They weren't even expecting so much rain last night."

Zenobia Ross paused with her spoon suspended in midair, halfway to her lips. "We were supposed to be leaving, the day after tomorrow. If it goes on like this, we'll have to stay longer."

Her husband shrugged, apparently unconcerned. "It's lucky we're at the top of a hill."

Suddenly, Edgar got up, muttered an excuse under his breath and hurried away in the direction of the telephones. When he returned he looked very unhappy, but refused to say who he had called.

The new-found camaraderie continued through lunch, and then on into the afternoon. The guests did not go their separate ways after lunch, as they would normally have done; there was nowhere for them to go. Instead, they sat around in the dining room, and then in the bar, drinking and talking about the rain. As the afternoon wore on into evening, they found there was no more to be said about the rain, and they talked of other things instead. But the murmur of the falling water was always there, in the background. The sound was becoming oppressive; Frances began to feel that there was no escaping the sound, and that it would never stop. For the first time that she could remember, the sound of rain prevented her from relaxing.

Nevertheless, she slept soundly that night. When she awoke, she sat up in bed, having forgotten the rain completely. It could still be heard outside the window, but she had grown used to the sound, and it no longer registered. When she opened the blind and saw the water streaming down the glass, Frances heard herself biting back a gasp of shock as the memory of rain came back to her. She was amazed that she could have forgotten about it, even for a moment, even in those few hazy minutes as she rose slowly out of sleep, like someone emerging from deep, deep water. Clarissa, she was sure, must already be on the telephone to her newspaper, demanding to know what was happening, how bad the flood was, what were the latest figures, the latest predictions, the latest witticisms, who had died during the night. Clarissa would not have forgotten. Frances shook her head, wondering whether she was getting old.

Hastily, she threw on some clothes and ran out on to the marble stairway. The rising water had come almost as far as the next step, but not quite. Frances knelt down at the water's edge, clutching the marble wall that bounded the stairway, so that she would not slip and fall into the lake. She could see very little below the surface of the water: the raindrops created too much motion, too many tiny waves, so that the surface of the lake was like the surface of a stormy sea. Little, angular splinters of light bobbed on the surface, reflections of the white sky above. Each droplet of rain sped down to meet its own reflection. Perhaps, Frances thought, the two were destroyed at the very instant that they met, unable to coexist at the same point in space. Or perhaps each of the two, the reflection and the real raindrop, was only transformed. She wondered whether she and Edgar were destroying each other, or only transforming each other.





"Mrs Tovey?"

It was the waiter, standing behind her on the stairway with a leather bag tucked protectively under his arm, and a small, guilty smile upon his face. Frances realised that she had never learned his name, if indeed he had one, and so had no idea of how to address him. It seemed silly, as well as inappropriate, to call him 'Waiter'.

"Are you going somewhere?" she asked him, at last.

He nodded. "I'm taking the boat. Only to the other side of the lake," he added hastily, though it was quite obvious to Frances that he was lying. "There's a house there where my aunt and my two cousins live. I just want to make sure they're all right. I should be back by lunchtime."

Frances nodded. "Do you know what's at the end of this stairway?" she asked him, abruptly.

The waiter laughed nervously, as if the question were some kind of test. "Who knows? I used to imagine that a whole marble city was lying there, under the water — marble houses with marble pillars, marble statues, marble roads. Sometimes the city would be empty, abandoned; other times there would be people living there, people just like us, wondering what lay at the top of the mysterious stairway, but never having the courage to climb up and see. Or maybe the people were all turned to stone, and the marble statues are really the people that used to live in the city." Having made this statement, the waiter turned away, embarrassed.

Frances thought for a moment of Mycroft, with his skin like blue-veined marble. Then she smiled at the waiter, and waved to him as he pushed the boat away and disappeared into the rain.

He was not back by lunchtime, and in fact they never saw him again. Zenobia Ross was oddly distressed by his sudden departure; or perhaps it was only that the rain was making her nervous and frightened, and the departure of the waiter underlined the fact that they were cut off from the rest of the world. Clarissa Hill did nothing to help matters when she announced that the telephones were no longer working. After she broke that news, which was possibly the last important piece of news she would ever break, there was a dismayed silence. Then Zenobia's blue eyes filled up with tears. The tears broke, and ran silently down her cheeks. Frances looked away. She too was worried, but there was no use in crying, as far as she could see. There was, she thought, quite enough falling water already.

On the fifth day, when only thirty-five steps of the stairway remained, Mycroft began to plan, reluctantly but seriously, for a long stay in the hotel. He gathered the party together and began to formulate a strategy, as if they were preparing to withstand a siege — which, of course, they were.

"The cellars are more than two-thirds full," he told them. "There's plenty of wine, and plenty of spirits; there is quite a lot of beer. But the water from the pipes has been fouled. We can only assume that under the constant pressure of the water above, some of the pipes have buckled — either that, or some parts of the system have simply become flooded. Whatever the truth, we have to assume that the tap-water is no longer safe to drink."

"I agree," Zenobia said, with feeling.

Edgar, massaging his temples, said: "Is the water from the lake not safe?"

"No!" Zenobia cried, and shook her head emphatically. "If you taste it — though I don't think you should even risk that — you'll find that it's salty. We can't live on beer and salt water."

"I can try to set up a still," Marshall suggested.



Mycroft nodded, rubbing his pale hands together. "Good. You oversee the construction of a still. There is plenty of water around, after all, if only we can purify it. Boiling and straining the lake-water won't be enough. We do need a working still. The next problem," he continued grimly, "is food."

Edgar Tovey, who out of the entire party probably enjoyed his food the most, looked up in shock.

"Don't worry," Mycroft told him. "We have stocks of food to last us some time. I am compiling an inventory; I suggest that we keep track of how much we consume. The larders are well-stocked, and so are the freezers. We are a little short of milk, but we have an abundance of whipped cream. It was a mistake," he added, casting his eyes to the ground and blushing. "I filled in the form wrongly; they sent us ten times as much whipped cream as we really needed."

All eyes in the party turned to Adela, and then back to Mycroft.

"We can catch fish," Edgar said. "I caught a few every day in the lake, before...before the rain. Now, if anything, there should be more. It's just a question of setting up lines in the right places."

Adela frowned. "Is that the best we can do?"

"I think so. There isn't any other natural food source nearby, and even if there were, it would probably be submerged by now. There are trees, but they're slowly drowning, and I don't think any of them are fruit trees. The birds are too hard to catch, I think." So saying, Edgar shrugged and smiled, not at all displeased that he would have to undertake the responsibility of fishing for the entire party.

They talked long into the night. Frances would always remember that meeting, afterwards, even when she forgot so many other things. There was a feeling that they could survive in the hotel, and even live quite comfortably, until help arrived. Even though winter was coming — the trees were losing their leaves, which fell with the rain, adorning the lake with a floating tapestry of reds and yellows — it seemed nothing to worry about. On that day, the fifth day, no one really believed that the rain could go on much longer. Mycroft found, or organised, or invented, essential tasks for everyone; and each of the party took some comfort in the knowledge that they were doing something, rather than just sitting around and staring out of the window, meekly accepting the fate that the rain had brought. Everyone knew, of course, that they were only doing as Mycroft suggested in order to keep their minds off the rain, while they waited for it to ease. They joked among themselves that Mycroft had put them all on his staff, without even having to go to the trouble of paying them. But Frances, watching the slow, steady rise of the water over the marble stairway, thought she heard someone calling her name, thought there was no one nearby. She looked up, and saw a flock of gulls wheeling across the sky; and she knew the rain would continue for a long time yet.

On the fourteenth day, when only twenty-nine steps remained above the water, Frances began to realise that they had settled into a routine. The tasks had become chores, and each person did their share: they had gone from playing house to keeping house in earnest. No one mentioned the rain any longer; no one wondered aloud when it would stop. Instead they gave their time to the jobs that needed doing: working the still, tending and maintaining the fishing lines, cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, updating the inventory. Edgar still paid special attention to the lines, enthusiastically experimenting with new locations and new types of bait.

Frances paid special attention to the party's records of weather and conditions and the water level. The weather conditions remained constant, unchanging; the water level continued to rise.

Relations between the guests gradually became less formal, as they got to know each other better. Frances realised that Clarissa's natural vocation was to be a professional gossip. Denied both a large audience and a large pool of source material, she began to stagnate. There were few secrets in the hotel, and the rumours that overlaid those secrets, while interesting, were hardly worth repeating over and over again. So, at first, Clarissa invented stories about the other guests; later, she would invent other guests. She kept a journal, using up their precious, though useless, supply of paper, in which the real guests and the imaginary guests met and mingled, and spent their time exchanging juicy titbits of illicit information about each other.

Marshall Ross, who had been calm at first, now trembled and stammered, in a constant state of agitation. He blocked his ears with cloth, against the constant, maddening laughter of the rain. He began muttering to himself; he grew irritable and aggressive, mistrustful of everyone except, perhaps, Zenobia. Zenobia, who had panicked at first, was now quite calm, and, along with Mycroft, handled most of the organisation. She was learning to adapt to this peculiar, brutally restricted life; she grew out of her formality more quickly than the others, and even seemed at times to be consciously rejecting it. She took to appearing in various stages of undress, eating with her fingers, and swimming in the salty water. She was the only one of the party who dared to swim in it, for strange, curiously-formed creatures had been spotted below the surface; yet she was still utterly convinced that one should not swallow even a single drop of the stuff, until it had been purified. Frances asked her why, but received no explanation. Gradually, the rest of the party progressed from being mildly shocked at Zenobia's behaviour to accepting it; and after a time they too tried eating with their fingers, and swimming in the water.

Frances was finding herself drawn more and more often to the water's edge, to stare down into the ever-widening lake, while all around her the rain went on falling. She recalled the single drop of rainwater she had swallowed, and wondered whether Zenobia's suspicions, whatever they were, were correct. Her relations with her husband, meanwhile, were somewhat improved, though Edgar still had not recovered the passion that he had come here to recover.

In fact, the only two people who seemed almost entirely unaffected by the rain were Mycroft, the proprietor, and Adela, the maid. The only sign of any change in Adela was a tendency to creep down to the cellar when she thought no one was looking, and taste the wine. No one begrudged her that small solace. The change in the hotelier was even more subtle. In fact, Frances sometimes believed that he was not altered at all. He still took his trolley away with him to Room Thirteen which, Clarissa declared, was definitely Adela's room: she had witnesses to prove it. Her witnesses, however, proved to be inventions, or perhaps even inventions of inventions, and so still no one really knew what was happening in that room. The silver domes on the trolley reminded Frances vaguely of breasts, though not, she thought ruefully, her own breasts. She felt a brief pang of regret for her youthful body, and then told herself sternly that it had been a long time, a very long time, since she was young — and that Edgar, too, was not as young as he used to be. At times she thought wryly that her husband was more interested in Mycroft than he was in her,





if only because the hotelier had taken a sudden and surprising interest in the operation of the fishing lines.

One evening at the end of the first month, Zenobia strolled in from the white balcony, her body still wet, and announced that she had seen a ship passing in the distance: a sailing ship, with three masts but only a single bank of oars. There had been a flag, but she had been unable to make it out. The others listened in silence to this story; some believed it, but wished that they could have hailed the ship; others said politely that Zenobia must be mistaken. Edgar took Zenobia's side, and Frances found herself automatically arguing the opposite case. Zenobia ended the dispute by declaring that the house itself was sailing, and that all they need to was erect a sail, if they wanted to contact other people. Then she walked out of the room, leaving the rest of the party staring after her.

By the end of the second full month of rain, there were only eight steps remaining above the water on the marble stairway. The rest had drowned beneath the trembling surface of the lake. There had been no electricity or gas for some time. The butane canisters, which Mycroft had kept for emergency use, were now empty, and the oil was running low. They kept a fire burning with wood gathered from the drowned trees that reached their black fingers out of the water, all around the hotel. This created a new task: tending the fire. Zenobia, who loathed that chore above all others, escaped from it by being the only person who could collect the wood without losing half of every load on the way back to the hotel. Though it was now November, and the water was very cold, she thought nothing of swimming naked to one of the skeletal trees, climbing up into the highest, driest branches — while the falling rain crept into her handholds and footholds, and made them slippery — breaking off a handful of branches, and carrying them back to the hotel. More than once, she had had to wrestle with the creatures that lived in the water, but they were no match for her. Once she even managed to kill one, leaping on to its back and snapping its neck as it bucked and thrashed beneath her. With a huge grin, she dragged its stinking carcass up the marble stairway and on to the balcony. It was black and shiny, with a body half the height of a human, but a very long tail; it had a mouth like a lamprey's, surrounded by vicious-looking teeth, and there were flaps of webbed skin between each finger and toe. Mycroft roasted the thing on a spit, but its meat tasted foul.

Frances took Zenobia aside after one such wood-gathering expedition. "Zenobia," Frances whispered to her, "did you ever follow the staircase down? Is there anything there?"

"Yes — there are buildings, hundreds of them. The whole lake-bed must have been a marble city. There are statues in the squares, and white marble tiles on the ground. In the centre of the town I saw a fountain; it still works, though I doubt the water is pure. It's beautiful, to see the water streaming up through the water."

Overjoyed by this news, Frances hugged the younger woman.

Clarissa had discovered the secret of Room Thirteen, and was busy altering her notebooks, in increasingly shaky handwriting. Room Thirteen was not Adela's room at all: the maid lived high up in the furthest reaches of the hotel, in the tiny Room One Hundred and One. Room Thirteen, on the other hand, was where Mycroft kept his cat, a stray which he had been feeding with whipped cream and fish stolen from the lines. Once the cat was discovered, Mycroft allowed it to roam free, and it became the hotel cat, and everyone's property. In this way, the last of the old hotel rules, the rule



against keeping pets, was abandoned. There had never been any liaison between Mycroft and Adela; but, as it turned out, there had been one between Mycroft and Zenobia, who was now pregnant. Zenobia was beginning to exhibit odd cravings: she began eating bones and shells, and even pieces of stone, ground down into a powder and mixed with the rainwater she had once vehemently refused to drink. Marshall was furious at his wife's infidelity, but he could not express his rage. He tried to speak, but no one understood him any longer. His words were like the cries of some wild animal. Zenobia was coming to resemble him less and less: her skin was growing pale, and blue-grey veins, like the veins in marble, were beginning to show. Her eyes turned from blue to blue-grey. Gradually, she began to realise that Mycroft was already married: he was married to his hotel. That was why he had, over the years, come to resemble it. Zenobia, not wanting to become the reflection of a reflection, abandoned her new lover, and took to spending most of her time in the water. Frances, who saw her most often as she waited on the marble stairs, noticed that Zenobia seemed to be growing webs between her fingers and toes.

Frances felt sorry for Marshall Ross, but not overly sorry, because as Marshall and Zenobia had drifted apart, Edgar had begun to regain some of his old confidence, and some of his old passion; and this in turn was to lead to Frances' escape. One morning Frances was sitting in her favourite place, on the few remaining steps, trailing her hand in the water, when Edgar came and sat down beside her in the rain.

"Is everything all right?" she asked, surprised that he should seek her out.

"Everything is fine," he assured her. "There are fish on the lines, there is wood on the fire."

"The water's still rising," she told him, with a touch of sadness in her voice. "I don't think it's ever going to stop."

Edgar shrugged. "I want to talk to you," he told her, hesitantly. "I want to talk about the day after the rain began; the time at breakfast, when I ran away to the telephone, and refused to tell you who I was calling."

"Who were you calling?" Frances asked him, in a whisper, and listened in silence as he told her.

"Are you angry?" he asked her.

Frances shrugged, and shook some of the rainwater from her face. "It seems a long time ago."

There was a long silence; the only sound was the constant chattering of the rain. Then Edgar said, softly, "Will you come with me? I want to show you something."

Frances frowned, but replied, "Okay. Just for a few minutes."

He took her up to the topmost floor, past the room where Adela slept, and through a tiny door in a forgotten corner. Behind the door was a short flight of black stone steps; and at the top of the steps was the open expanse of the roof. Frances had never seen the world from here before. She stood with her mouth open, gazing in astonishment at the view. Through the grey veil of the rain she could see the horizon, clear to the horizon, all around. The world was a great, empty expanse of shimmering water, broken only by the black bones of the trees, the closest branches mutilated by Zenobia's strong hands. Frances felt tears spring into her eyes. Then her husband was close to her, pressing his body against hers. Frances could not bear to tell him that she had almost forgotten about him, that there were other things more important to her, like a drowned city beneath the rising water; so she allowed herself to follow him as he moved. They struggled out of their wet clothes, Edgar clumsy with desire, Frances clumsy with feigned desire. There was still a kind of affection

between them, Frances discovered, as they made love beneath the rain. Later, as they lay side by side on the wet stone, Frances closed her eyes, opened her mouth, and let the sweet, sweet rainwater roll into her throat. It was then that she knew she would be leaving the place soon.

After three months had passed, Mycroft had established himself as the dominant male. He had fought Marshall Ross into reluctant, surly submission, and considered that all three of the younger women had become his — although Zenobia was now rarely to be found on land. He thought Frances too old to be worth fighting for, and so he left both her and Edgar alone. By this time, the water was lapping at the edge of the balcony; the whole of the marble stairway was submerged.

Clarissa kept all of the paper in the place to herself, and spent all her time obsessively making marks on it. They were no longer words, at least not words that anyone else could understand. Clarissa was never sure whether she understood them herself.

Zenobia had given birth. At first, as it became clear that she was in labour, Frances had been alarmed, since Zenobia could not have been more than ten weeks pregnant. She need not have worried: Zenobia laid a perfectly healthy clutch of eggs. Each egg was entirely round, and the colour of marble. Holding them up to the light, one could see the babies within, dark, slinking forms, with short bodies and long black tails. Frances realised that Zenobia had been eating bones and powdered stone so that her body could build the eggshells. After laying her eggs, Zenobia took to the water once more, and no one had seen her since. Adela, who had once been the maid of the hotel, adopted the eggs as her own.

One morning, at dawn, Frances awoke with a start, convinced that she had heard someone calling to her. But Edgar was asleep, and there was no one else nearby. Not bothering to dress, Frances padded out to the balcony and sat for a while on the topmost step, kicking her legs back and forth in the icy water. She waited, until Edgar found her. He sat beside her, silent, under the rain.

"Do you have to go?" he asked her, and then, when she nodded, he whispered: "Not yet."

"Come with me," she pleaded, knowing that he would not. "Come with me to the marble city."

"What if there is no city? What if the stairway goes on forever?"

Frances said nothing.

After a long while, Edgar kissed his wife, gently, and stepped back from the edge.

Frances did not look back. She stepped into the water, counting the steps as she descended: one, two...thirteen, fourteen...thirty-seven, thirty eight. On the thirty-ninth step she paused, and closed her eyes for a moment. She took a breath of salt water; then a deeper breath. Smiling, she continued on, down the marble stairway, down into the marble city. She looked up at the skin of the water, high above her. The raindrops hit the skin, and pierced it, and continued on for a moment before dissolving. She could no longer hear the sound of the rain; here, all was quiet. Then she looked back along the stairway, and saw, tumbling down the steps behind her, a few tiny spheres that refused to dissolve. Those were Edgar's tears.

Frances turned away, and walked on, into the drowned city of smooth white stone.

Far above, the rain went on falling.

Alexander's last story for TTA, 'The Mark of the Butterfly', proved extremely popular, and we may well be reading more about Henry Daker one day...



# IF YOU'VE EVER WONDERED:

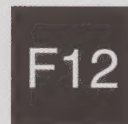
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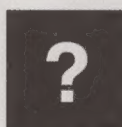


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